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## **The Bosun Chair**

**by Jennifer Delisle**



**University of Alberta**

The Bosun Chair

by

Jennifer Bowering Delisle



A thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts

Department of English

Edmonton, Alberta

Spring, 2003



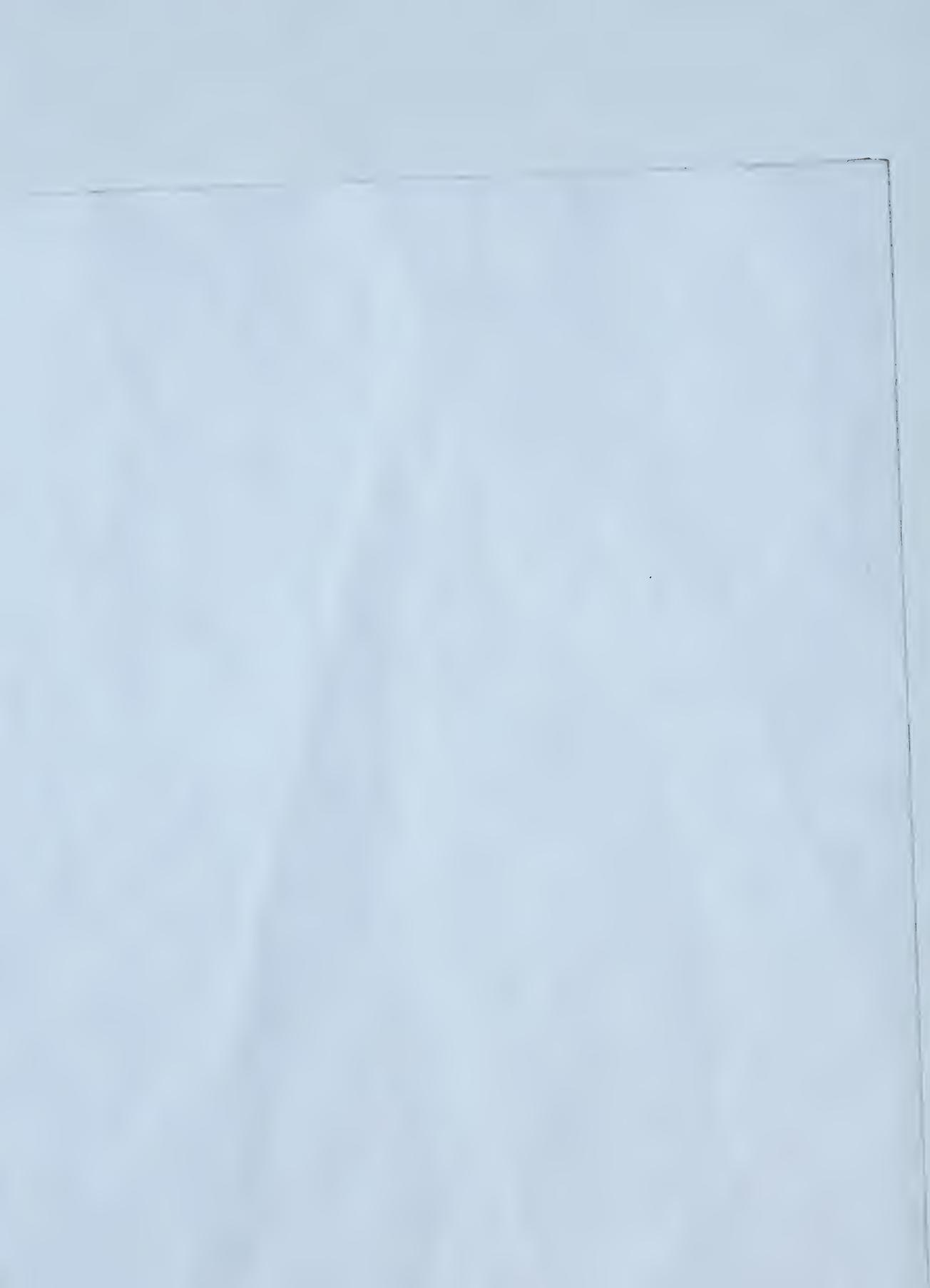
University of Alberta

Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research

The undersigned certify that they have read, and recommend to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research for acceptance, a thesis entitled "The Bosun Chair" submitted by Jennifer Delisle in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts.

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For my family,  
old and new

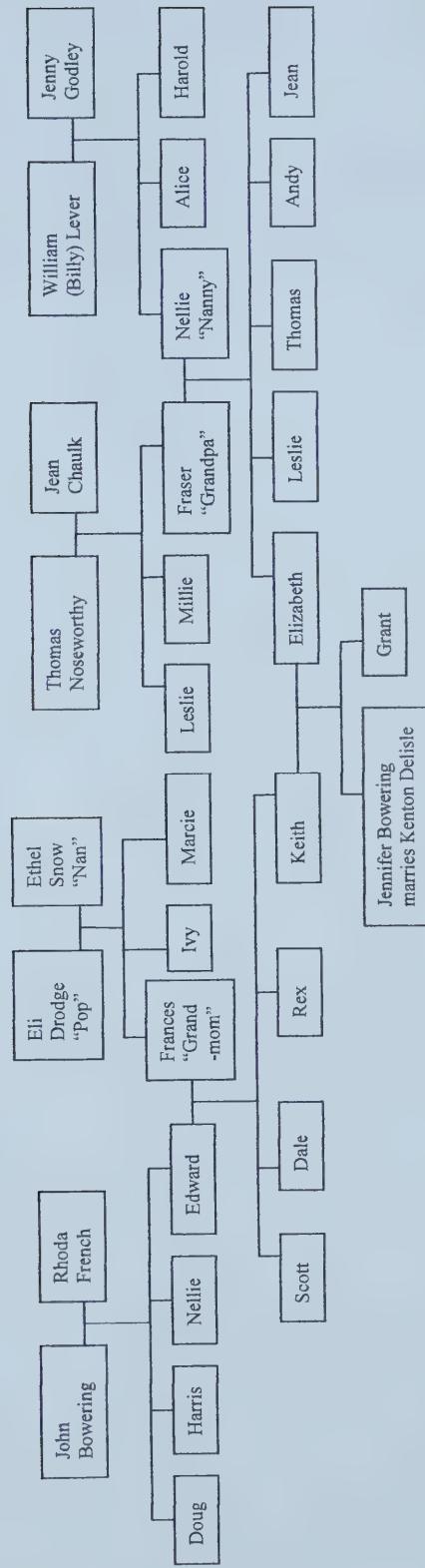


## Abstract

For many migrant writers the idea of home is embodied by an “imaginary homeland,” created by distance, time, and fallible memory – a homeland that exists only in the mind. How then can the children of diasporic families understand their identity when their concept of “home” is divided into birthplace versus ancestry, and when that ancestry is mediated by migration and cultural change? Born in Alberta to parents from Newfoundland, I explore this question by recording personal family stories against the background of Newfoundland history, including the fishery, war, and political change. Made up of prose, poetry, and ancestral artifacts, *The Bosun Chair* questions the very definition of autobiography by posing a family archive as a representation of personal identity. In the process, the “imaginary” elements, the tricks of memory, the assumptions of an outsider, and even the gaps in the story, become not obstacles but crucial elements making up that diasporic identity.



# Family Tree





## Acknowledgements

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*While here upon the trackless deep,  
So far away from home;  
The thought comes forcibly to my mind,  
We know not where we 'll roam.*

*Mid dangers thick, seen and unseen,  
On waves which smash our barque, -  
A sailor's life is hard indeed;  
And oft' the way seems dark.*

*So from experience now I speak,  
Mine's not as hard as some-  
But sunshine has not always lit  
My path since I left home.*

*It was June the twenty-eighth  
The Swallow sailed away  
For Labrador, with wind ahead  
To beat out of the bay.*

In the summer of 1915 my great-grandfather, Captain John Bowering of Coley's Point, Newfoundland, set sail for Labrador for the season's fishing. By the time he and his crew were ready to return home at the end of October, the ship was so full of fish that some of the sailors had to be left behind to return on another vessel. After four months away from their families, the Captain and his crew were eagerly bound for home.

*Now all on board, - ready to sail,  
That fine October day;  
All hoped a breeze of North West wind,  
Would hurry us on our way.*

*It was upon the twenty-fifth,  
The Swallow sailed away  
From Domino, for Newfoundland,  
And all seemed bright and gay.*



My great-grandmother, Jean Chaulk, was sixteen when she set sail aboard the merchant schooner *The Duchess of Fife*, in 1907. A maid working in a home in St. John's, catching a ride home to her family, she may have been the only passenger. She might have been traveling home to help her family with the fishing season, to join in the endless work of drying fish. Outport girls often worked in the city through the winter, and came home for the summer when the season began.

*We left St. John's on Monday morn,  
Our spirits were light and gay.  
We were bound home to Brookland,  
In Bonavista Bay.*

*While Carbonear we reached that night,  
And early left next morn,  
To run for Catalina,  
As our captain feared the storm.*

In a time before made-for-TV movies or slick news magazines, in a place where the villages were tucked between cliffs along a lonely coastline, with names like “Seldom-Come-By” or “Come-By-Chance,” fortunes and misfortunes were related in words, not pictures; tales were told in rhyme, remembered to music. Poetry was not an esoteric art. Newfoundlanders sang modest ballads in tiny kitchens, to make light of hardships, remember tragedies, and to express gratitude to those who helped them through troubled times.



This tradition pervades both sides of my family. My mother's grandmother and my father's grandfather both wrote a simple ballad to record their experiences at sea. I do not know if they filled journals with lines, I doubt they considered themselves poets. And yet long after their deaths, their words still seem to breathe. These verses, "The Loss of the *Duchess of Fife*" and "Trip of the Ill-Fated Swallow," are what remain of my ancestors.

When I was small I was always secretly angry with my parents for leaving Newfoundland. I grew up hearing St. John's referred to as "home," and declared that someday I would move there. I wrote stories and poems set in Newfoundland, describing the pattern of tide against the rocky shore, or the smell of salt in the air. Alberta-born, I collected whalebones on a shelf, wore trigger-mittens, renounced beef. When I was married placed seashells in a vase for centrepieces, and chocolate seashells on our cake. I never considered myself an Albertan.

But nor am I a Newfoundland. I fit somewhere in between, the way a fish can end up in a desert, bound in rock, subject to the course of history. Instead I collect old photographs of Newfoundland outports, pour over the music to traditional songs, draw out family trees. Write poems. Five thousand kilometres from the Atlantic I write my way toward it, through distance and time.

As I pour over old pictures of my ancestors with my mother, she wonders, *Imagine what it would be like to be adopted, to not know where you came from.* I think of after-school specials, children adopted into loving families who are still driven to find their birth parents. My research into my ancestry is driven by more than an interest in history, is more than just an anthropological study. Mikhail Bakhtin once wrote that for



the Romans, as clans passed down family archives to new generations, autobiography “wrote itself.” Autobiography transcended the individual, transcended the very notion of a lifetime. If we are the sum of our histories, then I am a sailor, a fish maker, a poet. This is my archive.

*The first day of November, we  
To further get did try;  
Crossed White Bay, Green Bay, through the run  
And put in Seldom-Come-By.*

*The wind veered down, but had it held  
Twenty-four hours more;  
We could have seen our friends, and told  
Our trip to Labrador.*

As the *Swallow* was heading toward home, a fierce storm began, tearing several sails. Eight years before, as *The Dutchesse of Fife* approached the harbour at Catalina, a storm blew up, taking out the main boom, leaving the schooner to drift all night. Both ships were left to the mercy of the wind.



~ ~ ~

In the summer of 2000, two years before we were married, my future husband came with me and my family on a vacation in Newfoundland. My parents took an earlier flight; Kent and I travelled with my brother. Stuck on the plane between the two boys, acting like brothers, amusing themselves by pressing the button that made the phone receiver pop out of the seat ahead of me, and into my lap.

We went to St. John's about every two years when I was growing up – I still love the smell of old books in a damp basement, still think of it as a scent intrinsic not to my grandparents' house, but to Newfoundland. I had not been back since junior high, and longed not only for a glimpse of the ocean, but the ticking of my grandfather's grandfather clock, and the taste of tea, which is not the same in my grandmother's dining room. Sweeter, more fragrant.

My father had the whole trip scheduled out for us – a whale-watching expedition, an outing to Cape Spear, a visit with Great Aunt Jean and Uncle Doug, who gave my brother, me and Kent each a crisp ten dollar bill, folding it into our hands. I had not lived at home for a year, and it was strange to wake to Dad's alarm clock, follow his instructions, sit in the back seat of the rental car.

Grandmom billeted me and Kent in the basement, in separate single sloping cots on either side of the room. Tried to fit in one but his arm kept hitting the panelled wall, our hips sinking closer to the floor. We woke apart with backs creaking, our necks



crackling side to side. Dad calling down the stairs, *it's eight o'clock*, when it was really seven thirty.

My dad scheduled a family road trip to the historic town of Trinity, some three hours ride north of St. John's. My parents and brother, Kent and I, my father's mother, my mother's parents, my great aunt Alice, all trekked out over the Trans-Canada highway, cresting over barren rock, through a sea of trees. Trinity is an ancient fishing village perched along the coast of Trinity Bay, restored to old-fashioned quaintness. Since the 1992 cod moratorium the boats have been mostly docked, floating quietly in the harbour. But this outport has been lucky compared to most. It is full, no longer of sealers and fishermen, but of actors. The town is not just a town but a set, backdrop to the famous "Trinity Pageant," a mobile play that leads tourists on foot through different historical scenes, acted out in first person or narrated with booming voices.

A bearded merchant told us of early settlers who starved to death over the winter. The merchants arbitrarily set the price for the fish the settlers caught, calculated the debt the fishermen owed them for provisions and fishing gear, and determined that after a season of fishing, the fishermen in fact owed their employers money. Without the fish that they had caught, denied even flour to make bread, many families did not survive the long winters.

We moved on to old-fashioned fish flakes perched on the beach, while women in 19<sup>th</sup> century costume played out their scripted gossip and piled the cod to dry. We stood among the gravestones and heard of the Trinity sealers who perished in the 1914 Newfoundland sealing disaster, which saw seventy-eight men freeze to death during three days lost in a storm on the ice. We moved en masse through the town, squeezing our way



to the front for a seat on the grass for the next scene. We learned of horrors and hardships, a history both dramatic and foreign. Tourists sightseeing through the past.





*The picture reminds me of Grant Wood's famous painting "American Gothic," with their stern expressions and rigid pose – all it needs is a pitchfork.*



## The Duchess of Fife

On the wall in a hallway of my parents' house are dozens of antique-style pewter frames, with copies of old black and white photos that my mother rescued from dust in my grandparents' basements. My mother at three on a swing-set. My Nanny and Grandpa as teens, in a boat on a pond, before they were married. Other stern faces, before it was customary to smile and say "cheese" for photographs. When it took several seconds to take a photograph, and the subject had to stay perfectly still. Smiles too hard to hold.

One of the photos is of my great-grandmother Jean with my great-grandfather. The couple is posing side by side on their farm just outside of St. John's. He wears high-riding pants with suspenders and a short tie; I recognize the wild curly hair I see in my grandfather, my mother, my own mirror. Her hair is swept up and she squints into the sun. The picture reminds me of Grant Wood's famous painting "American Gothic," with the subjects' stern expressions and rigid poses – all the photo is missing is a pitchfork. Grainy and strange, and a little comical, my great-grandparents live for me in those poses, in grey, trapped without smiles. I nervously think of another family portrait, my own forced grin. If that was the picture that survived, if that was what everybody thought I looked like.

I do not have a picture of my great-grandmother as a teenager; by the time this photo was taken she was showing the signs of age, her face hard and intimidating. I don't know what she looked like as a sixteen-year-old servant in a St. John's household, can't



imagine her fresh-faced and innocent. Perhaps she had the face of someone born old. Leaving home to become a domestic in early twentieth century Newfoundland would certainly not have been easy. St. John's, with its crowds, its bustle of strangers, would have been a lonely place for a young girl from the small outport of Brooklyn, on the northern coast of the Bonavista Peninsula. The eastern coastline between St. John's to the south and Bonavista Bay to the north is jagged and long, with arms and peninsulas that jut out into the sea. What roads existed were poor, and to travel by land between St. John's and home would require retreating deep into the province around the immense bays, and doubling back through the rocky territory. The trip was best made by sea, and the primitive sailing ships were dependent upon unpredictable winds and subjected to savage storms.

St. John's is accessed by the "Narrows," the imposing entrance to the harbour, flanked by towers of grey jagged cliff 700 feet high. Inside the harbour's mouth the sealing ships docked, passing reeking carcasses into the seal oil refineries. The schooners huddled in further, the harbour layered with great canvas curtains, a patchwork of sails, with masts pointing up to pierce the fog. The waterfront was lined with wharves, spread with drying codfish, waiting for inspection by merchants. Tall scaffolds for drying fish were built like overpasses across the streets. Around the north side of the harbour the old city rose in tiers against the hills, a bustle of narrow dirt streets, wooden tenements and gothic churches.

It was a city of about 30,000 people, huge compared to the tiny outports of Bonavista Bay, teeming with canvas-topped Victoria carriages for taxis, electric street lights, the ringing of street cars. Cast-iron cisterns for horses dotted the roadsides, and



ladies crossed the street at intermittent raised stone platforms to avoid sinking into mud and manure. The air was black with coal.

Jean may have worked in one of the Victorian mansions on Rennie's Mill Road, the looming houses with bay windows rippling across the front, crisp white porch pillars shading the doorways. Twelve-foot plaster walls slathered in floral wallpaper, ornate silver tea sets on carved trolleys, shiny mahogany newel posts at the foot of the stairs. Home to British merchants trotting down Water Street – the business district – and tall-backed ladies at home with soft hands. The average maid in this period would have worked sixteen hours a day, six days a week. She would have made about ten dollars a month; some girls received no wages, only their room and board. Domestic service was usually a job left for outport girls; working-class women from St. John's, employed in hat shops on Water Street, would never touch their positions.

Each week was subject to a rigid work schedule. Washing day was always Monday, the hardest day of the week. She would begin the day by boiling pots of water on the stove, and whites or stained items might be boiled right in the pots, sometimes with harsh lye. She may have had a primitive washing machine to help agitate the clothes, but stains were scrubbed by hand on a washboard, knuckles red and raw in the hot soapy water. Once washed each garment was cranked through a ringer to squeeze out the excess water, and carefully hung to dry. Tuesday was ironing, with heavy sad irons heated on the stove. She would cycle through several irons, putting them back on the stove to reheat when they cooled. Continually stoking the fire, the small kitchen closing in, the air heavy and hot. Sweat trickling down her back. Wednesday was baking, loaves and loaves of heavy, buttery bread for the family, cookies or scones for afternoon tea parties. Cleaning



upstairs Thursday, downstairs Friday, scrubbing floors, polishing banisters, beating rugs and dusting knickknacks. More baking Saturday, between the dishwashing and meal preparation, shedding her dirty apron to answer the door to callers. Retreating to a tiny attic bunk with drafts blowing through the eaves, a hook for her apron behind the door.

These are guesses. I do not know for whom she worked or if she worked alone - there may have been a cook, or a parlour maid. I do not know if the family was large, if she shared a room, if there were cows to milk and butter to churn. I can only go by statistical averages and educated speculations. For me this is a time for museums; I work part-time at a restored 1911 Edwardian mansion where I interpret the life of prairie farm girls working as maids in Edmonton, the same age as Jean would have been.

At the museum I am half maid, half lady, washing cups from my own tea. Dusting is part of my job, but not scrubbing floors. I greet guests at the door, but I do not take their calling cards, instead seating them in the tea house, pointing out the coat rack in the corner. We don't have to wear corsets under our costumes, and in the summer sometimes get away without petticoats, lounging back with legs crossed when there are no visitors about. I show children on field trips how to make cookies, and they delight in the work, sneaking licks at the dough stuck to their fingers. Telling them to *stay behind the invisible fence* as I open up the hot wood stove to put in the sheet of cookies.

The stove likes the rain. There must be a scientific reason for this but it seems more like she has moods, a romantic affinity for rainy days, grumpy in wind. Coaxing fire in early morning can be difficult, like waking up a groggy sleeper. Balls of newspaper, careful structure of kindling and log, opening up all the doors and vents to let air flow through. And sometimes it needs my own breath underneath the embers, flickering into



light and then dying again with the rhythm of my breath. Soot all over my shirtsleeves and fingers, occasionally the side of the nose. And the smell of warm wafting through the house. On quiet afternoons the kitchen is my favourite place. I love the taste of smoke, the small cozy room, the sound of my shoes on the bare wood floor.

Jean Chaulk married Tom Noseworthy in 1913. I don't know how they met, or where. If she met him in St. John's while she was employed in service, hiding secret love letters in her bed post, locked out Sunday night after staying out too late. Hiding her beau from her employers, who may not have approved of courtships. Tom was a mason, working on new stone houses being built on Temperance Street. Fitting together the rocks, spreading the mortar like thick margarine on toast. Grey dust coating his hands, shoulders bent over buds of walls. Entire buildings growing beneath his hands. Maybe she loved him for this, coming home with concrete dusting her blouse cuffs.

She would have stopped working once she was married, to keep her own house instead of someone else's. Only women who were really poor would continue to work after marriage, especially in service. Women were expected to stay at home and start a family of their own. Through the 1910's and 20's Tom and Jean bore Leroy and Ralph, who both died as infants. Leslie, who was killed in the Second World War. Only daughter Millie, and only surviving son, Fraser, my grandfather.

Framed on the wall in my grandfather's bedroom is the baptism certificate of Ralph Noseworthy, my grandfather's older brother, who died of measles at six months old. Leroy did not even make it to a baptism. In these times it was not unusual to lose a child, or two. The deaths of Ralph and Leroy would not have set my great-grandmother



apart from other mothers. Stillbirths and miscarriages were almost universal, diseases like tuberculosis and whooping cough widespread. Midwives delivered babies almost universally, doctors being called upon usually only if the midwife requested emergency assistance. Doctors were extremely expensive, and midwives were often paid in fish, bread, or quilts. While most midwives were quite capable, they were ill equipped for emergencies, often arriving with nothing more than a bit of twine and a pair of scissors. There were no effective laws regulating the training of midwives until the late 30's, and before that they practised alone and unlicensed. Once a child made it into the world there was the constant threat of meningitis, influenza, and other common diseases.

My great-grandfather gave up masonry early in his marriage, and went to work at the Harvey and Brehm margarine factory. My grandfather doesn't know why he switched occupations, if the work didn't pay as well, or as steadily, or if he simply didn't like it. When my grandfather was two Tom bought a 50 acre farm on Torbay Road, which he tended in the evenings, growing common root vegetables and keeping dairy cows.

While her husband went to work each day, Jean Chaulk Noseworthy raised her three surviving children, managed a household, oversaw the farm. She helped to seed potatoes, pull weeds, thin the vegetables, in between the familiar duties of scrubbing laundry, cleaning the house, making bread and meals, raising the children. Picking the rocks from the land in spring, the stones brought up to the surface of the soil by the winter cycle of freeze and thaw, was often a woman's job. Some say it seemed that the land in Newfoundland grew rocks as well as vegetables.

During the Depression farmers could not get a good price for their produce, and often could not sell a lot of their crop. While the drought that dried up farms in the west



did not affect Newfoundlanders, they felt the economic sting nevertheless. My grandfather remembers Jean unravelling burlap potato sacks, dying the strands, and hooking it together to make a runner for the stairs. Any scrap material was saved like jewels, meticulously sorted, hooked into rugs or sewn into quilts. Even if they could not sell their crop, the farm provided at least enough for the family to eat. Perhaps those less fortunate knocked on her door, begging leftover vegetables, or a bit of milk, as many did in those long years.

With dairy cows and a cellar of home-grown vegetables, Jean always kept her family fed. In the fall she and other farm wives would store a stock of potatoes, carrots, turnips, and other produce in barrels in the cellar, ordering salt meat to round out December dinners. She would have made jiggs dinner, a traditional Newfoundland meal, of grisly beef cured in salty brine, boiled in a cauldron with cabbage, potatoes, carrots, and even dessert, a raisin bread pudding called figgy duff. The duff, wrapped in its pudding bag, somehow never took on the flavour of the beef, but the vegetables came out salty and soft. Toes sinking into rag rugs, wrapped in homemade quilts, Jean's family padded up to bed with their bellies full.

*Down off the Funks next morning,  
We struck the northern gale,  
She sprang a leak, some manned the pump,  
While others shortened sail.*

*Brave Edgar Pye stuck to the pumps,  
And did he ev'r give ore.  
He proved himself a man of great,  
Both on the sea and shore.*



When a gale is approaching a Newfoundlander can feel it in the air, horses become agitated, the ocean seems to inhale. Gale winds can blow people and buildings off banks, can heave the sea with such force that ships bend with the strain, that waves a hundred feet high scoop people off of cliff tops.

*The sea washed down our cabin,  
From the berth unto the floor,  
It threw me with a terrible force,  
I thought that all was o'er.*

*I crawled on deck to view the ruins,  
And as I looked around,  
I saw Jay Pardy on the house,  
With his leg broke lying down.*

As the storm raged on the *Duchess* was tossed about in the swells, the people on board smacked into the deck by the giant, violent waves. Limbs snapping like driftwood. I can imagine my great-grandmother dripping and flushed, her wet skirts sticking to her legs as her boots slipped across the deck.

In 1940 Leslie, Jean's eldest son, enlisted in the British Royal Navy, and left to fight in the war. He died a mere three months after he left home, on a torpedoed mine sweeper somewhere on the other side of the Atlantic. Buried in a London cemetery. And then Jean saw his ghost all the time. Haunted by his memory, her inability to save him, to put flowers on a grave. She told my grandfather of her visions and he dismissed it as crazy talk, angered by this way of remembering him.



Patrol Service Central Depot,  
Lowestoft,  
Suffolk.

10th September, 1940.

Dear Madam,

It is with very deep regret that I learn of the sad death of your son Warwick Leslie Noseworthy, Ordinary Seaman R.N. Patrol Service (H.O.), Official Number, LT/JX.208914, who is reported to have lost his life in London Docks as a result of enemy air action on 7th September, 1940.

Please allow me to express sincere sympathy with you in your bereavement on behalf of the officers and men of the Royal Navy, the high traditions of which your son has helped to maintain.

Yours sincerely,

*John R. Gray*,  
COMMANDOR.

Mrs. Jean Noseworthy,  
Portugal Bay,  
St. John's,  
Newfoundland.



When my grandfather went to enlist a few months later he was told “one in the family is enough.” And though he cannot prove it, he has always believed that his mother was behind his refusal, that she begged the service board not to take him. Instead he learned Morse code, sailed up to Labrador to do meteorological work and wireless transmission. Losing him anyway to remote northern coves, the threat of submarines in Labrador waters. Her only daughter Millie married a Canadian soldier, and by the war’s end would follow her new husband back to Calgary.

These were not experiences that she wrote about, these struggles were simply the way it was. Jean would not be considered a heroine for surviving these small disasters.

Empty nested, Jean and Tom sold the farm for a house on Cavell Avenue in St. John’s. The last in a row of attached wooden houses, long and narrow, a gravel alley running up the side. My great-grandmother immersed herself in church projects, the Women’s Association, meetings every evening. Assembling care packages for soldiers, making Red Cross bandages.

*The wheel been smashed to pieces,  
By a downfall of the boom.  
The captain’s leg been broken too,  
Unconscious of the wound.*

*The wounded men were got below,  
And those that did not fall,  
Resolved to do the best they could,  
To save the lives of all.*



I don't know what my great-grandmother did with this poem when she finished it. She may have shown it to family and friends, she probably kept it hidden in a trunk or a drawer. When her children were growing up she did not tell of her adventures as they went to sleep, would not tell stories by the fire. My grandfather heard of her shipwreck experience from her brother, his uncle Pearce. When Jean found out she was furious.

My grandfather tells me:

*Nobody knew anything about it and she wouldn't, she wouldn't talk about it whatsoever. Just her type. She would never talk about anything in her younger days.*

It was Christmas time when my great-grandfather became sick, a flu that would not go away. The company doctor dismissed his symptoms, told him to stay in bed. One afternoon Jean found her husband lying on the bathroom floor. She somehow managed to pick him up and put him back in bed until the ambulance arrived. He was diagnosed with a ruptured diverticulum, an inflammation in the bowel. He was in the hospital for three weeks. He was only 55 when he died of peritonitis, the poisons in his belly flowing through his blood stream.

If Jean wrote him odes they no longer exist; she mourned in her own way, without words. Surrounded by the pregnant quiet of relatives in black dresses, his body laid out in the parlour as the family gathered for the wake. Normally bodies were laid out for viewing for three days before burial. But they decided to bury him after two, concerned for the state of his body if they waited another day.



In the 1950's, when my mother and her two older brothers were small, her family lived in their grandmother's house on Cavell Avenue. The boys slept in bunk beds in their own room, and my mother slept in a tiny bedroom that was really a hallway, with the door to her parents' room inside.

My mother called her grandmother Nanny, the same thing I call my grandmother. But mine sounds more like a Nanny, crocheting afghans for her grandchildren, making seafood chowder, watching her "stories" on daytime TV. My great-grandmother was a stern woman, even frightening to a little girl, and her room was dark and forbidden. My grandfather as her only surviving son felt obligated to take care of her— would even name his youngest daughter after her – but was agitated by her presence, the way she criticized his wife. My mother recalls an argument that ended with her father standing up at the dinner table with a plate full of food, and dropping it back down on the table from two feet up, gravy splattering across the cloth.

My mother tells me:

*But you know at the same time she did some very special things. I remember when my sister Jean was little I would sit on her bed and sing to her with my guitar. And I remember Nanny would come in and say 'what a good girl you are to sing your sister to sleep,' and what a nice voice I had.*

When my mother was eight her family had grown to seven with the arrival of her little brother Andy. My grandfather set out to purchase a bigger home. He put a down-payment on a house on Berteau Avenue, with plans to build a suite for his mother in the basement. He told his family that they would all move the following month, after the previous owner had moved out, and his mother went along with the plan. On a Friday



night my grandfather borrowed a big pickup truck and went home to tell his family they would start moving the next day. Suddenly Jean announced “I’m not moving anywhere!”

Despite my grandfather’s pleas she would not change her mind, and since she owned the house he could not force her to give it up. Nor could he take his furniture away and leave her with an empty house. The family had put all of their savings into the down-payment, and couldn’t afford to buy new furniture. Grandpa bought his mother a second-hand fridge and TV so that they could keep their own, but sofas, tables, chairs, were all left behind. The family moved into their new house with their own beds and little else to furnish it.

*We drifted fast to Brownsdale,  
Uncertain of our fate.  
The rudder fastened with a rope,  
To make her go in straight.*

In my grandfather’s version of the wreck of the *Duchess of Fife*, both the captain’s legs were broken and his mother bravely took the wheel, steering the ship across Trinity Bay through the fierce storm. This seems unlikely, since the poem suggests that the same swing of the boom that broke the Captain’s leg also destroyed the wheel – that the only way the ship was steered was with a rope tied to the rudder. I don’t know how my grandfather’s version began, if this wheel-taking was part of his uncle’s tale, if the poem is simply misleading, purposely humble. The event is also remembered this way in a file at the Provincial Archives of Newfoundland, only this version is full of errors, citing Jean’s sister, Tryphena, as the heroine, and the ship as departing from Labrador.



Perhaps this is simply how my grandfather would prefer to remember her, courageous and strong, guiding her friends through the storm to safety.

The schooner was steered aground with the hopes that rescue would come from the shore. There must have been a violent jolt as the rocks tore into the bow of the ship. Jean would be haunted by the sound.

*The Duchess struck the reef three times,  
She then lay hard and fast  
Her bottom grinding on the reef,  
While seas went on her mast.*

*It seems that day I'll never forget,  
Until my dying days.  
The screaming of the women,  
Amidst the winding sprays.*

My great-grandmother lived for a year by herself in the house on Cavell Avenue. She was befriended by a Mrs. G \_\_\_\_\_ across the street, who started coming over every day, spending morning noon and night with her. And gradually Jean's furniture began to disappear. Her mind was starting to deteriorate with Alzheimer's, and within a year she had given away ninety percent of her belongings. With his own house and his own family, my grandfather wasn't there to protect his mother's things. Mrs. G \_\_\_\_\_ continued to take advantage of her elderly neighbour, imagining that when she died the old lady would leave her everything.

At the time my grandfather was working on the construction of the new nurses' residence for the General Hospital, which was just a few blocks from his mother's house.



*And she phoned me one day, in this wee little voice. She said I hurt my arm, she said. So I said all right I'll be right over. So I ran across there, and I went in the house. And she was there and her arm was swingin.' So I asked her what happened and she said she went to put out the garbage, and she opened the screen of the front door, the storm door, she held on to the storm door, and she reached for the garbage and the wind took the door and her with it. She went right out across the street and broke her arm.*

The wind had been waiting all these years to break her bones.

With a broken arm, unable to take care of herself, Jean had no choice but to move in to my grandfather's house. And once her arm was healed she stayed. My mother grew taller and began to bring boys home to meet her family, and Jean's mind continued to deteriorate. One evening she came up to one of my mother's boyfriends and accused him of taking ten dollars out of her purse. A subsequent boyfriend was accused of taking her red shoes.

My mother remembers:

*The last straw was when she walked out in the middle of the night in her nightie and started walking down the hill. And a man stopped because it was obvious something was wrong. He asked where she was going and she said 'I'm going home.' So he said where do you live and she said 'Cavell Avenue.' And of course we had moved to Berteau Avenue then. So he took her to Cavell Avenue and then he said 'you're not Fraser Noseworthy's mother are you?' – St. John's was that small – and she said yes, and he said 'you don't live here anymore.'*

*So by this time Mom and Dad were beside themselves. So then Dad put her in Hoyle's Home. She was diagnosed with 'senile psychosis' – there was no Alzheimer's*



*then. I remember going to visit her in the home. She smelled like urine, with her stockings rolled down to her ankles, and her dress was dirty. So Mom as her daughter-in-law took a lot of her clothes home and washed them for her, but the hospital still got the clothes mixed up and put the wrong dress on her. It was really difficult and emotional for Dad and finally he forbid me to go see her. He said "I don't want you to remember her like this." The last time I went she was babbling like a baby.*

Jean Noseworthy died in Hoyle's Home in 1975, at the age of eighty-five.

*The boats were hauled both back and forth,  
Till all was safe on shore.  
The wounded men with fortitude,  
Their suffering increased more.*

*The people took us to their homes,  
And treated us most kind.  
To tell of half they did for us,  
Expressions I can't find.*

Jean writes of the bravery of her fellow crewmembers, of the hospitality of the men and women who rescued them, but nothing of her own heroism. As the Captain lay helpless, the sixteen-year-old girl helped to make a boatswain's chair or bosun chair – a wooden plank and a sling usually used to hoist visitors onto and off of ships. Thanks to my great-grandmother's work, her shipmates, including the wounded, could be lowered into the lifeboats sent from shore as the *Duchess* sank. I can imagine her small trim body scrounging for rope and board, wet fingers trembling. Gently easing her Captain into the sling, his limp weight pressing on her shoulder. Soothing the men as they dropped over



the side of the deck. Bending against the ribs of her corset as the ship careened in the waves, somehow hoisting herself overboard. She was the last to leave the boat.

That is how the story goes, how it has been passed down to me. I have nothing to prove that this is true. But of all the ways to remember her, I prefer to think of her as a heroine.



## Nightgown Walking

Nightgown walking  
she wanders toward home  
snowdrift steps  
the way chocolate turns white at the corners  
Names swallowed like water  
    a faint rumbling inside  
Skin forgotten like a coat  
At breakfast  
    tablecloth gazing  
her eyes springtime tap water, settling

I don't want to know these stories  
Not a second childhood but a childhood again  
I want nickel street car rides, and salt water toffee  
mummering for biscuits  
and fine Water Street hats with blue ribbon  
children stealing seal scraps from oil-sodden wharves  
stray goats, and fog  
like putting on a hat



## Corset

It is morning in the museum  
No children today to explain  
the corset to  
to bake cookies on the wood burning stove  
In 1915 they drank tea  
and had garden parties, and fought war  
and listened to the Victrola  
Is it haunted? a woman asks the woodwork,  
the dark closets  
Are there secret passages?

I am a historical  
interpreter  
as though the past is another language  
we cannot speak  
She comes for turkey pot pie  
and buys tea cozies

We are hunkered down in the premier's house  
in the shade of bigger buildings  
as the grain elevators fall  
farmhouses sigh into earth  
and east, the lighthouses are commissioned in paintings  
before they are shut

Upstairs the corset has fingerprints along the spine  
laid out on a dresser  
But we cannot tell of political scandal  
of alcoholism or cancer, or being gay  
Of post traumatic stress disorder  
Are there ghosts here? a woman asks  
No ghosts here



## Background Noise

He builds grandfather clocks  
fine tea trays with turned legs  
and once a baby cradle for grandchildren  
    resemblance in the bald head, the wrinkled mug  
Saws and hammers, the scratch of sandpaper  
drowning out the street noise

They say the sound of the city changed like a traffic light  
once horse clops on gravel  
and on the next block cars, with low rumbling engines  
And they got used to it  
Like they would when left-sided drivers  
received a communal Canadian certificate of citizenship

    the “Squid Jiggin’ Ground” played on the Peace Tower carillon  
And everyone moved over to the other side of the road  
Brakes screeched for days

She hums the notes of favourite hymns  
and cannot hear the miters and jigs in the garage  
the kettle whistle  
TV soaps and a black poodle named Blackie, barking  
Just her own tune  
    children playing, church bells  
    clops on gravel

Every time I stay there, the first night  
I can hear my grandfather’s clock chime the hours  
and the second night I don’t hear it at all





*...once the scene of fresh bread in a hot kitchen, the aroma of tea and fresh thick cream. Salt beef for Sunday supper boiled in a cauldron with potatoes and carrots and cabbage, steaming up the windows.*



## A Collection

I was a little girl the first time I went to Coley's Point in Conception Bay, Newfoundland. The land where my grandfather had grown up, and where his father before him had grown up, was still in the family then, though no one lived there anymore. The house looked run down but intact from the front, but the back of the building had completely fallen away, so that it resembled a doll's house, one side open to move the baby into the cradle, or the family to the table. I don't know if it really looked like this - I could not have been more than seven - but this is how I remember it. I was not allowed to go in because it was not safe, but I watched my father go in to see what was left. He picked through pieces of grey swollen lumber, brushed away cobwebs, stepping tentatively. He found barrels of china, smooth milky plates that seemed to glow inside that dusty cave, but left it all there so that he wouldn't upset the uncles who may have wanted the pieces.

Hard to believe that this house was once the scene of fresh bread in a hot kitchen, the aroma of tea and fresh thick cream. Salt beef for Sunday supper boiled in a cauldron with potatoes and carrots and cabbage, steaming up the windows. Lumpy feather beds piled high with soft worn quilts, the warm dim light of kerosene lamps. I try to imagine my grandfather as a little boy here, dressing by the crackle of the fire, reading adventure stories, swallowing spoonfuls of molasses to cure colds. Or my great-grandfather as a boy, eating fish and brewis for Sunday breakfast – boiled salt cod with hard bread



softened in water, served with greasy cubes of fat back pork called scruncheons. Looking out toward the ships.

After my great-grandmother died, in the late 40's, the house in Coley's Point simply became the storage place for barrels of china and trunks full of quilts. The children had all moved away with lives of their own, my great-grandfather remarried, and gradually the house was looted, anything of value carried away.

My heart aches for these lost artifacts. My father's father died when I was only three, and I have no memories of him except for the frozen images of photographs. I know that once I sat on his lap eating watermelon. My great-grandfather died when my father was three, and my father has no memories of him, though I have seen a picture of dad as a toddler holding the hands of both his grandfathers, one on each side. I cannot interview my grandfather for details of his childhood, for memories of his parents. And I imagine that if only my great-grandparents' quilt lay at the foot of my bed, that their whole lives would unfold before me, that they could come back to life in the texture of cloth.

When I visited her recently my great aunt Nellie gave me a set of crystal salt and pepper shakers that had belonged to my great-grandmother, and I have examined them, weighed them in my hands, looking for clues to the history of their owner. They are heavy, with polished silver tops, and they smell like my great-aunt, the heavy flowery perfume that fills her tiny apartment. And instead of my great-grandmother I think of Aunt Nellie holding the shakers in her soft lotioned hands, carefully washing out the pepper in her kitchen, the eighteenth floor Burnaby apartment with a spectacular view of downtown Vancouver.



Still I collect these pieces carefully, like an archaeologist dusting fragments of bone from sand. Diligently reconstructing this side of my family from old photographs, a few dishes, the scattered memories of a great-aunt who lives far away. Reading my great-grandfather's poem "Trip of the Ill-Fated *Swallow*" for the first time was like striking oil; an account in his own words of a life-changing experience, an expression of creativity, a potential source for my own love of words. A fascinating link to the culture of early twentieth century Newfoundland. He begins in the spring, as the ship first heads out from Bay Roberts, the slow laborious trip north to Labrador.

*The night came on, the wind increased,  
Could little progress make;  
With "jumbo" torn, in Carbonear,  
Did therefore shelter take.*

*Then on the second of July,  
We further went our way,  
With wind ahead, same as before,  
We beat out of the bay.*

Each stanza is dramatic, telling the story of their journey to Labrador, and the subsequent shipwreck, with descriptive detail and dialogue. Each line is an artifact I can hold in my mouth, weighing the words on my tongue, analyzing their rhythm and sound. The ballad outlines the ship's route to Labrador, the changing winds, ports of call, the season's catch. It is many pages before the *Swallow* encounters the storm that disables her. My great-grandfather writes down every detail of her journey from the day they left home, building suspense, giving us not only a picture of disaster but also a glimpse of everyday life on an early twentieth century schooner. Sometimes I can imagine that he is



writing for me, that he wanted his descendants to hear his story. And sometimes it feels like he writes only for himself, to record the position of sails, the direction of wind.

*But on the third day of July,  
The wind had then died out -  
When five miles south of Baccalieu,  
We turned the ship about.*

*No sooner had we tacked our ship,  
The wind began to veer;  
We slacked our sheets, and North, North East,  
Was the course we then did steer.*

Each summer hundreds of Newfoundland schooners ventured north to the coast of Labrador to fish for cod. The fish was more plentiful along the shores of Labrador than off the banks of Newfoundland. The ships would leave in June, and would not return until the fall. If they were unsuccessful in the Strait of Belle Isle, which runs between Newfoundland and Labrador, schooners would continue north as far as Cape Chidley on the northernmost tip of Labrador, which looks north across the Hudson Strait to Baffin Island. On this trip the *Swallow* stopped in Domino, about 200 kilometres up the Labrador coast. The coast of Labrador is scarred with giant fjords, some 4000 feet high, and its waters are studded with hundreds of tiny islands. It must be overwhelming to approach it by sea, flanked by gleaming white icebergs, the rocky plateau looming ahead like a fortress.

The *Swallow* did not belong to my great-grandfather. The small sixty-five ton vessel was owned by a company called A. Fradsham Company based out of Bay Roberts, a larger town just a few miles down the road from Coley's Point. There are many different types and styles of schooners; a schooner is defined simply as a ship with two or



more masts, a mainmast and a foremast. To me their silhouette conjures tales of pirates' treasure, romantic voyages of discovery, ships full of exotic spices and silks. They seem leftover from earlier centuries. A two-masted schooner, like the *Swallow*, usually has seven sails or more. On the mainmast the mainsail and topsail fly, and on the foremast are the foresail and two square sails, the fore-topsail, and the fore-top-gallant-sail. In front of the foremast are the "jumbo" sail and two triangular sails, the jib and the flying jib. A boom projects from the masts and is attached to the bottom edge of the sails. Pieces of line called sheets are fastened to the sails to position them relative to the wind.

Often whole families would be part of the crews of these schooners, including women and children. The *Swallow* had several women and children aboard. Young boys would help to prepare the fish once it was caught, and when women weren't busy with this task they might work as cooks. This was a tiresome job - men fishing on the Labrador would eat around seven meals a day. These included four "mug-ups" – light meals of bread and tea - interspersed throughout the day, breakfasts of porridge with molasses, large dinners at midday often of boiled fish and potatoes, and a lighter meal called tea in the early evening - vegetable soup thickened with rice, potato hash with tinned meat. I cannot imagine boiling a kettle on a ship tossing in the Atlantic, the scalding tea sloshing over the rim of mugs. Or gulping down cold fish on a dreary morning, ice crystals forming in your beard and on your lashes.

The crew of the *Swallow* would probably have used cod traps to catch their fish. Cod traps were made of three inch mesh, and forced the fish in with a wall of net stretching to the shore, called a leader. Traps could hold up to one hundred quintals of



fish, one quintal being 112 pounds. They were hauled in to the schooner by skiffs sometimes twice a day.

*We landed quite a lot of salt,-  
Eight hundred hogsheads near-  
And hoist'd in a store so high,  
'Twas hard to get it there.*

*And next we started making fish,  
Almost the last to do;  
A busy time, when weather fine,  
For almost every crew.*

The fish, which could weigh more than ten pounds, were pitchforked onto the stage where a disassembly line was formed: the cutthroat slit the fish with a double-bladed knife, and passed it on to the header, who removed the head and entrails. The liver was thrown in the liver puncheon, saved for the cure-all cod liver oil. The splitter, usually the skipper of the ship, removed the backbone, a job that required skill and dexterity. The scent of blood and fish would permeate your body, the skin must emanate the metallic smell in bed at night, at breakfast.

The salter then put the fish in barrels of salt where it was pickled for several days. The *Swallow* carried eight hundred hogsheads of salt, one hogshead being a barrel of sixty-three gallons or more. The fish was then taken out and washed, and was ready to be “made.” Making the fish means laying it out to dry on the beach on “flakes,” scaffolds covered with spruce boughs. This task was not as simple as it sounds. The process would take weeks, involving a sequence of laying the fish out to dry and then piling it up to squeeze out the water, turning it up and down, handling each delicate fish dozens of times. The fish were piled in a certain order depending on their size and the stage of



dryness. Sometimes the piles were covered with rinds, wide strips of bark, to protect them from rain and dew, and the fish makers always watched the skies carefully for signs of bad weather. Once dried the split fish were stiff wafers; they look like they would snap like crackers.

Sometimes the fish was made at home, once the ship returned to Newfoundland. Other times it was made on the beach in Labrador. The crew of the *Swallow* took advantage of the fine weather and made their fish in Labrador. This was hard and messy work and would have taken many long hours; they had caught more than 3000 quintals of fish - at least 33,600 pounds. This catch was not as large as they had hoped, but even so, so much fish was loaded on to the ship that forty-three people returned to Bay Roberts on another vessel, called the *Lorna Doone*. Seventeen people, including four women and a few children, went on the *Swallow*.

*That night the wind was good and free, -  
A breeze of North West wind;  
We glided up the shore, and left  
Old Domino behind.*

*We got across the Straits next day,  
The wind was very light,  
And veering down, we did go in  
To St. Anthony that night.*

It was not easy to captain a schooner at the beginning of the Twentieth Century. No schooner could sail directly against the wind or tide, making them difficult to navigate. There were no weather reports in those days, nor were these small boats equipped with radios. And while the ships did have barometers that indicated the approach of a storm, they gave no clues as to its course or intensity until the ship was



already in the midst of it. In intense gales it was not uncommon for the schooners to strain under the weight of their cargo and begin leaking. The only hope for survival in those cases was the chance that a passing ship may take the crew off the schooner, leaving the vessel to sink.

When my dad was growing up his father, an accountant, would be sent to do work out in various outports, for months at a time. Even his generation unable to escape this scenario of absent fathers. Rather than cope with three boys alone, when my grandfather was sent to work in nearby Bay Roberts my grandmother decided to move into the house in Coley's Point to be near her husband. With four children she had to go back to the life of her mother's generation, use an outhouse, remember how to light a stove, bring in water from the well.

My father remembers his dad pulling the boards off the windows to let light into the dark house. They didn't sleep upstairs because it was too hard to heat, and they weren't sure how stable the floor was. But my father remembers wandering through the bedrooms, quilts still on the beds, my great-grandmother's old loom in one room with a rug half hooked, left when she died. Huge fully-rigged model schooners that his father had assembled as a boy. These things too were all left in the house, to keep the peace between siblings whose father had died without a will. And as the years passed these things were worn out by wind and rain as the house opened up to the weather, the outside slowly coming in. And I have imagined that as these items were destroyed or stolen, pieces of my history were also stolen, that quilts and dishes and a gramophone held facts and stories that nobody remembers anymore.



*But just before the daylight broke,  
The wind had veered right down;  
The Cabot light was on her lee,  
We thought we would get around.*

*But no, the wind was blowing hard,  
The seas were rolling high;  
And everything looked dark and sad,  
Beneath the angry sky.*

The Captain's wife, Rhoda, would have had no way of knowing that her husband's ship had met a storm. Without wireless communication, she simply was left to run the household and hope for his safe return. In the spring when her husband was getting ready to set sail she would be getting ready for summer, washing and storing the thick winter quilts, squeezing out the heavy sopping fabric. Every housewife cleaned her house from top to bottom in spring, scrubbing the hooked mats, lugging the feather mattresses outside to be aired, repainting and papering the walls. Saturdays were "scrub days," which meant scrubbing the windows and doors, the baseboards and all the furniture, scrubbing down the floors, and scrubbing the threshold with fresh water so that it gleamed white. Polishing the stove with lead blackening until it shined. Since the kitchen was the warmest room in the house it, and not the parlour, was the room for visitors. A well-polished stove was the mark of a good wife.

All summer long she would make the meals for her and her mother in law, who lived with them – pea soup and baked beans, fresh bread almost daily. My attempts at homemade bread have been confined entirely to an electric bread maker. But in my great-grandmother's days every woman knew how to make bread, there was no Dempster's



wholegrain, IGA bakery, Wonderbread. Bread making was hard labour; the tiny kitchen filled with the hot dry heat of a roaring stove, the dough heavy and requiring intense kneading. Her strong buttered hands folding it over, and over, leaning into the table and heaving it up. Sweat from her palms salting it through. Then picking the spot in the kitchen with the best temperature to rise, perfectly timed, punching it down again. Never cutting it while still hot, when the bread was prone to crumble – not a crumb was wasted. And the smell of bread and wood smoke must have filled the house, wafting through the dark Victorian rooms. Steaming, glistening with creamy homemade butter.

Rhoda kept a vegetable garden in front of the house, where she grew carrots and parsnips, turnips, rhubarb, and cabbage, to feed the family. In those days if a woman did not keep a vegetable garden the family would go without; you could not just go down to the grocery store and buy your carrots for Sunday supper. The garden had to be thinned and fertilized, and carefully weeded; a weedy garden was the sign of a lazy wife and a source of shame in the community. Vegetables were stored for the winter in cellars, the earthy odor of old turnips and carrots filling the damp room. The best heads of cabbage were pickled in barrels of salt, in much the same way as the fish. Behind the house spread a long potato field, stretching up and over the crest of a hill. If the time to harvest the potatoes fell while her husband was away, Rhoda hand dug the potatoes herself, leaning up the steep slope, skirts dragging in the dirt. Several barrels were kept for the family, and the rest they sold to supplement their income.

The bedrooms were not heated, and Rhoda would cocoon herself in quilts to try to keep warm in the night. She would heat a beach rock in the stove, wrap it in a towel and bring it to bed with her. There was no way to communicate with her husband, to ask if



they had caught any fish, to tell him about her day, what their daughter had learned to say.

Their first child, my great-aunt Nellie, was just a year old.

*With mainsail, and with foresail reefed;  
Whole jib and jumbo too;  
The foresail it began to tear;  
Which gave us enough to do.*

*We tried to get our foresail down,  
And then, alas! We found  
The Cabot Island was ahead,  
And she would not go round.*

The skipper managed to quickly change course and avoid the rocks of Cabot Island, but soon yet another sail, the jumbo, began to tear.

*We lowered our mainsail - all seemed dark,  
Crushed, hopes of getting home;  
We ran her then before the wind;  
We knew not what would come.*

They contemplated turning back to Seldom-Come-By to mend the sail and wait for fairer weather. But the wind quickly changed to blow them east, picking up into a gale. High seas and blowing snow pelted them as the night grew darker.

*A dreadful night was coming on,  
All wondering what would be;  
The wind was blowing fiercer still,  
With very heavy sea.*

The foresail swung around and burst the rigging, before it blew away. The foremast began to topple. Some casks broke loose and knocked the wheel out of place, before tumbling overboard. Through the night and the next morning the crew worked



hard to secure the wheel, while the schooner pitched up against the waves at steep, unnatural angles. I can only imagine that the drop back down into the troughs must give you the same feeling as an elevator that drops too fast, throat thick, stomach behind your tongue. The mast was rocking back and forth, tearing the deck open underneath it. They tried to secure it with a brace and tackles, but the violent rolling of the ship burst it free again.

By the storm's third day the main rigging burst and the mainmast began to sway. Though they managed to secure it the ship began to leak with the strain. The men had to pump the water out continually, and tried to lighten her by throwing the fish, their summer's work, overboard. The ship continued to leak, and waves continued to wash over the deck. They knew that the *Swallow* would never make it back to land.

*On the fourth night, just after dark,  
Our hearts with hope did beam;  
While working hard to keep afloat,  
A steamer's light was seen.*

*We saw that she was going West,  
And thought she soon would come  
And take us from the sinking wreck,  
And carry us toward home.*

*We made a flare-up, blew our horn –  
Did all that we could do;  
She did not notice us at all,  
But on her course did go.*

That night passed without another sign of anyone, and all through the next day the crew of the *Swallow* continued to pump, searching the horizon for any sign of rescue. As the ship drifted into her fifth night since the storm began, some began to lose hope.



*But no! The scene did quickly change;  
For at ten o'clock that night,  
While anxious eyes were looking hard,  
One shouted "There's a light."*

They fired muskets and flares, praying that the steamer would see them, until finally the boat changed course and came their way.

*She stopped, and then the Captain said,  
"Well are you in distress,"  
And "Do you want assistance;"  
And we all shouted "Yes."*

*They lowered the life-boat, came 'longside  
To see what they could do,  
They took the baggage, then the girls,  
And likewise all the crew.*

As the lifeboats rowed away toward the steamer Captain Bowering looked back at his ship where it was left to sink. For nearly a week they had fought day and night to keep the schooner above water, and the Captain found it hard to abandon it.

Once aboard the steamer skipper and crew discovered that she was a Norwegian ship called the *Hercules*. They had drifted many miles from Newfoundland waters, and the *Hercules* was bound for Europe. After another long week at sea the steamer landed in Stornoway, Scotland, a small Gaelic port town on the Isle of Lewis. Customs Officers came aboard, and when they heard of the Newfoundlanders' plight they immediately helped the shipwrecked crew to find lodgings for the night. Nine were billeted in a sailor's home, the girls went to a hotel, and the rest were put up in a boarding house.

*TO: The Captain, Mates, Engineers and other members of the crew of S.S. Hercules*



*We the undersigned do hereby wish to express our thanks and gratitude to you for your kindness and hospitality shown to us in our distress. I am sure words fail to express how we feel toward you when we think of how you have rescued us from the sinking schooner.*

*The kind actions you have done for us; the kind words you have spoken to us as strangers during our stay with you shall not soon be erased from our memory. And wherever it may be our lot to go and whenever we may look upon a Norwegian Captain or sailor we shall always look upon him as a friend and in our hearts shall be found a warm place for him.*

*As we have nothing financially to compensate you, we trust that our superiors and those who represent us and our country shall not fail to amply reward you and I know the great God of the universe, who has not failed to see your actions, shall much more reward you.*

*I trust it will not be your lot to pass through such an ordeal as we have passed but, if it may, I trust you may find in an Englishman or some other nationality such a friend as we have found in you. May I say in conclusion, I trust that you will arrive safely home in due time and that you may be prospered on whatever voyage you may go.*

*Signed  
Captain and Crew of Swallow*

*Nov. 30<sup>th</sup>, 1915*

The men should have returned home in September or October. The *Lorna Doone* made it back to Bay Roberts with the bulk of the crew, but by November there was still no sign of the *Swallow*. Many probably took them for dead. My great-grandmother's sister-in-law went to see a fortune teller who lived nearby. The fortune teller told her that the men were alright, and that they would return for Christmas. I don't know if she consulted a crystal ball, or tarot cards, or read palms. My great-grandmother did not have the time of day for fortune tellers and dismissed the prediction with disdain. Winter was coming, and she would have been hunkered down in the kitchen like most women, sewing and knitting clothes for her family. I am learning to knit at the museum where I work - a historically accurate activity for quiet afternoons. My fingers are still awkward



with the yarn, but the more experienced knitters move gracefully, like the needles are appendages. It is soothing to sit in silence and listen to the clicking of the needles together, faint, rhythmic, like the sound of a watch. And in between these long fingers, tiptoeing, whole socks emerge, like they were hidden in shirt sleeves. I can picture Rhoda sitting by the fire, her wool, (not acrylic like mine) slithering across the old wood floor. Making little sweaters for her baby with mechanical skill. I don't know if she would have knit her husband his stockings, his mittens, the things he needed to go out on the Labrador that always needed replacing, or if she had given up hope too.

I have a picture of Rhoda in a formal pose, with a large white hat, a high-collared white blouse, and a long dark skirt like the ones I wear at the museum. When I first saw this picture as I child I thought it was wonderful; it seemed to me that this dignified lady in beautiful old clothes was a character from a movie, a Mary Poppins – I remembered her as holding a parasol, though there isn't really one in the picture. Now I examine this picture for clues to who she was. Though her dress is formal her hands give away her lifestyle; they look meaty and strong. I catch my breath when I notice that her left eye squints slightly, a flaw I have always hated in my own face, in pictures.

In the matching portrait of my great-grandfather he is smiling slightly. And he looks just like the pictures I have seen of my grandfather, in my old baby albums, the same straight nose and stroke of mouth. In the end all I can recognize in these pictures is a family lineage, pieces of myself reflected back at me.



At this time Europe was well into the First World War, and though Newfoundland was a British colony the British government, paranoid of plots of espionage, was reluctant to help the crew of the *Swallow*. When my great-grandfather returned to the Custom House next morning he was dismayed to find that nothing had been done to help them. The Custom House officer told my great-grandfather “We’re not supposed to send you home. But I’ll see what I can do.”

*I said “That thing seemed awful strange,  
And hard to understand;  
Norwegian sailors were so good,  
As to bring us in to land.*

*And here among our British friends,  
There’s nothing can be done;  
And is it possible you say  
We cannot be sent home.”*

*So there and then he set to work,  
A message sent away  
To Liverpool, stating our case;  
And then to me did say.*

*“Tomorrow I will let you know  
Whatever can be done,  
The board of trade may take it up,  
And try and send you home.”*

I don’t know if these words were shouted, or spoken with calm and kind tones. I don’t know if my great-grandfather was the sort of man who made demands or made friends, if he was sarcastic, or pleading, if he was so frustrated by his situation that he lost his temper completely. However he said it, it seems the speech was powerful enough to prompt the officer to action.



The officer sent the case to the board of trade, and my great-grandfather and his crew set out for Liverpool to argue their case. They left at eleven o'clock that night and spent the night on a steamer to Kyle. It was the beginning of December.

*At four o'clock that morning, we  
Went steaming from the quay;  
Then up to Kyle, where we did land,  
At eleven o'clock that day.*

*When daylight came, and we could see  
Along the Scottish shore;  
The hills were covered in with snow,  
Almost like Labrador.*

From Kyle they had to take four trains, and spent all day and all night travelling before they reached Liverpool at six the next morning. The Newfoundlanders had to get passports to prove that they were British citizens before they could be allowed to board any ship. With some difficulty they managed to secure them, but still had to wait for more than a week before a steamer would leave for Canada. The crew was billeted in a kind sailor's home, but the days seemed endless. Liverpool in 1915 was a bustling industrial city, with grand medieval buildings, narrow slum streets, tram cars clipping through grey slushy snow. The dock area was a complex of looming warehouses, war ships docked, soldiers in seedy dark alleyways. It must have been a strange and overwhelming place for a Coley's Point native. But a week in Liverpool and John Bowering gives no impressions of the city.

On December tenth they were finally headed home on the *Pretorian*.

*We then steamed down along the shore,-  
That Irish shore so green,*



*At night all lights were out on deck,  
For fear of a submarine.*

*Next morning we were clear of land,  
The seas were rolling high,  
Not many to their breakfast came,  
For some thought they would die.*

They made it through more heavy seas until, eleven days later, they finally docked in St. John, New Brunswick.

After they arrived in Canada someone sent a wire to Bay Roberts, to inform their families that they were on their way home. Aunt Nellie tells me that a friend who lived in Bay Roberts ran without stopping all the way to Coley's Point, probably a forty-five minute run, to tell my great-grandmother the news. I don't know when she heard, how many more hours or days she had to wait before her husband actually appeared at the door.

So close to home it seemed that every obstacle was put in their way to delay the sailors' reunion with their families. It took several hours for all hands to pass the emigration officer, and they could not arrange to leave St. John until that night. It took two more days by sea and train to get to Port aux Basques on the west coast of Newfoundland, where they changed trains yet again. But the train was four hours late, they missed their connection, and had to wait for the night train at Brigus Junction. By 1915 the Newfoundland railway, once romantic and exciting, had bankrupted its owners and the government. The tracks were in poor repair and the stations decrepit. The narrow track was windy and careened down steep grades, and the going was slow. They finally



arrived in Bay Roberts at ten o'clock, Christmas Eve, two months after they had started for home, six months since they had last seen their families. The longest minutes must have been the trip down the road to Coley's Point. I don't know if someone gave my great-grandfather a ride, or if he walked.

Even in 140 stanzas of detailed verse, my great-grandfather cannot tell the whole story. He does not write of his wife's stress and worry through his absence. He reveals little of his own feelings and fears through his experience, or how the families made it through winter with no fish to bring home. He cannot write how once he returned, he never went to sea again, but became a carpenter, made barrels for potatoes and drying fish. Had seven more children, four of whom died in childhood.

Like my maternal great-grandmother, John Bowering didn't like to talk about his experience. My great-aunt Nellie was too small to remember the event, and knows little more about it than what the poem tells us. She remembers him as a carpenter, supporting his family building houses in Grand Falls and St. John's. Though no longer a schooner captain, he still found himself far away from his family for months at a time. And she remembers finding him at night in the loft of the "store," the old storage shed, mending nets for caplin by lamplight.

I began this project with the lofty but vague notion of proving something about the Newfoundland folk ballad, to compare and contrast my maternal great-grandmother's poem with that of my paternal great-grandfather, to analyze the social conditions that produced the poetic accounts of shipwrecks on both sides of my family. But I plow through researching not early twentieth century Newfoundland poets, but the way your



jaw aches from gnawing on fisherman's hard tack, the mushy sliminess of wet bread crusts about to be boiled into figgy duff, traditional raisin pudding. The way that seagulls descend in a horde after fish are cleaned on the water. My great-grandfather's ballad is precisely detailed down to the schooner jargon. *Jib and jumbo, slacked our sheets, halyard and tackles, foresail reefed.* But the more I read it the more I find missing. He does not tell me the texture of rope in his hands, the force required to turn the schooner's wheel. The numbness of wet fingers against the cold scaly skin of cod. If at only thirty-one his crew respected him as Captain. If he had his own cabin or a cramped bunk between the other sailors, the air heavy with the smell of men unshowered, steeped in saltwater and fish juice.

I went to Coley's Point the second time as a romantic teenager. All four walls of the old house were gone now, and the grass had grown over rooms, the stumps of walls. Embedded into the ground was half a teacup that had surely once touched the lips of my great-grandmother, waiting through a cold winter wind for her husband to return. Unsure if he was even alive, until that moment on Christmas Eve when he opened the door and she put her knitting down, kissed him with tea-warm lips against the cold salt of his skin. I collected the china pieces in a shoebox, clumped still with soil, and kept them in my closet for years.



~ ~ ~

The first time I ever went drinking with my parents was on that same trip to St. John's in 2000. Glasses of wine with Sunday dinner was one thing, but I had never dreamed of going bar-hopping with Mom and Dad, my aunt and uncle, sucking back Strongbows in strobe-lit clubs, my mother saying *ew*, are you drinking *beer*? It was the annual George Street Festival, a weekend when they close the infamous George Street to traffic and open up the bars to one big street party. We carried our plastic cups into the street, moving toward the outdoor stage and the pocket of crowd bulging around it, filling the width of the road. Holding our drinks above our heads to manoeuver through. The band was playing Blondie cover tunes - a style that fit somewhere in between our generations. Ordered beer on the next round to prove to my mother that it is drinkable.

My Uncle Andy suggested that my boyfriend needed to be “screeched in,” a Newfoundland tradition that initiates mainlanders into the culture with a series of humiliating tasks. The victim must bite the tail of a caplin and put the rest of the fish in his pocket, kiss a cod, shoot a glass of screech – a dark Newfoundland rum – and be able to recite a Newfoundland expression. When asked *is ye a screecher?* to prove that you have completed the ritual you must reply, *deed I is me fine old cock and long may your big jib draw*. Which means, indeed I am (a screecher) my good friend, and may you always have wind in your sail. The six of us, my aunt and uncle, my parents, Kent and I, set out to find a bar that would do a screeching during the busy festival - my uncle asking



discreetly at each place as Kent wondered why we were hopping so quickly from bar to bar without even having a drink.

We finally wandered off of George Street, down Duckworth, to a pub called Nautical Nellie's where they were willing to do screechings. Soon my family decided that I must be screeched in too, I was no Newfoundland. No amount of protest could change their minds. Kent and I stood side by side at the pockmarked wood, me pronouncing the phrase perfectly, a little haughtily, he struggling through *may your jib... big... draw jib...* It wasn't that I minded the public humiliation of shooting salty whipped cream ("seagull shit") or even the uncomfortable sensation of caplin tucked in against my bare hip, since I had no pockets in my skirt. I was almost embarrassed that I wasn't a Newfoundland to begin with. I'm no land lubber, I don't lub the land at all.

Bowering is a prominent name in Newfoundland, and when the bartender asked my name to put on my official "screeched" certificate, he said *are you sure you aren't a Newfoundland already?*





*... Nan had three daughters, Marcie, Ivy, and Frances. Names for grandmothers and great aunts, not names for girls fishing off the wharf, young women in curls and lipstick kissing soldiers goodbye.*



## Ballycater

*Have you ever heard of ballycater? Ballycater, there must be a more scientific name for it but as far as I know it's B-A-L-L-Y-C-A-T-E-R, it's ballycater. You might find another word in a dictionary or some book but it was big pans of ice. And I think they broke off from a bigger, like an iceberg that came down from the Arctic? And sometimes they would come in the harbour, and fill up the harbour, big thick pans of ice and then some of them would move off and others stay around the shoreline? And we would go down, and hop from one pan to the next and as you stepped on the pans they had a tendency to go under? And then of course there were several coming behind you, everybody's stepping on the pans, and it was more likely that they would go under and of course they would come back up again but I mean you would get your feet wet, and you had to try to get from one pan to the next without getting your feet wet. And also hoping that the next pan wouldn't be too far away so you could hop to it.*

They called it copying, this dangerous game of hopping on ice pans in frigid Newfoundland waters. As she tells her story I try to picture my grandmother, now seventy-three, as a knobby adolescent copying on the ballycater, slipping around on the ice, the pans tipping dangerously as she lands too near the edge. But I can only picture her as she is now, pant suit and knee highs, hair dyed pale blonde, stepping forward on the ice in pink slippers.



I have to rewind – the story is interrupted by the sound of my mother opening the oven in the background, in the house I grew up in, five thousand kilometers from the Atlantic. As the oven creaks closed Grandmom barrels on beneath the hisses and echoes of the mini cassette in the tape recorder, playback loud to hear her voice, warbly and quick, amidst the kitchen sounds. My father's mother was visiting Alberta for Christmas, a good opportunity to record her stories. As her voice copies back between memories of her childhood, I copy her tales to the page.

*Oh you aren't going to record this now are you, she asks. I don't have any interesting stories to tell.*

*My father used to leave to go to the Labrador in May and he wouldn't return home until September? October? And I can remember stormy nights saying to Mom "my gosh, I wonder how's Dad." And that's when it would come in my mind, mostly when we had storms. And then she used to say "oh, don't worry, because this is only here where we are. They're not having any storms where he is that's too far away." And maybe that was true but of course they're having storms down there when we don't know about it. But because there was no way we could contact them we didn't know where they were, or how they were, or anything until they got home. She was pretty optimistic and accepted that as a way of life really. They were worried you know they were worried but that was a part of life, that's the way of life in Newfoundland.*

Little Heart's Ease, where my grandmother grew up, is a tiny outport a few hours drive from St. John's along a serpentine road. I went there once as a little girl with my



parents, on one of our two-week summer trips to their home province, squished in the back seat between Grandmom and my Uncle Scott, reading mystery novels until I felt carsick. We parked in front of Grandmom's childhood house, long since sold and resold and abandoned. The house was sagging and bent like the eighty-year old she must have been, her second story like deflated breasts sunk down to her waist, the soft porch skin rolled around her ankles. The windows were dark and dirty, but I imagined the rooms filled with old dusty Edwardian furniture, cobwebs and locked trunks, the shadows of my paperback ghosts.

What I remember most vividly are the rose bushes. A dark house with chipped and weathered paint, an overgrown garden, and then a perfect fence of rose bushes, all in bloom as if someone had been watering them and trimming them. Defying the decay behind them. And then in the yard beside the house an abandoned, dilapidated school bus, like a page from the wrong story.

*We spent a lot of time on the water. Catching every kind of fish that we could catch, just for the fun of it. Girls were real tomboys, and the girls spent just as much time in the boats and leaning over the wharf with these long poles catching everything we could. And then we used to bathe them and pretend they were - it was the craziest thing to do - pretend that we had a cemetery! And my sister, Marcie, she caught a very ugly looking fish and soon as she brought it to the surface and saw what it was, she dropped the hook and tried to get up over the wharf. Now it was very difficult to get over some of the wharf from the boats because the boat was only a little boat you know, but she went up very fast this time because she was so scared. It was a - what they call a sculpin? S-C-*



*U-L-P-I-N sculpin. And it was a very ugly fish. Sculpin are sometimes called pig fish or toad fish, a foot long with a big head and mouth, covered in spines. They eat fish entrails at the head of a wharf, and dwell at the bottom. I had never experienced catching one of them and I'm glad I didn't because I think I would have done the same thing as she did. Drop it and run as fast as I could.*

Little Heart's Ease is a village of a few hundred, white church on the hill, small huddle of houses that smell of tea and chowder, kitchen window overlooking the sea. A few years ago one of the biggest cocaine busts in Canadian history happened here, sleepy harbours easy entry points for smugglers, aging fishermen in bed by nine.

On the tape the crinkle of tin foil, as my mother prepares a salmon for the oven. Atlantic salmon farmed in pens off Vancouver island, packaged in styrofoam for the meat section of an Edmonton Costco. Perhaps the farthest one can get from Little Heart's Ease, Newfoundland. But my grandmother is there, in her mind, far away from this dry air.

*And another time we were fishing like that from the wharf, and there was a space where you get from the wharf down on the next level, which was sometimes filled with water. But when the tide went out it was dry? And there was a bunch of us down there fishing and another bunch on top of the wharf fishing. And having fun, you know, not particularly wanting to catch a fish but for something to do, play mostly. And one of the guys who was with us, a young fellow there, must have been about eleven - didn't know how to swim and he was standing on the edge of the log like thing which kept up the wharf – it was quite greasy and full of seaweed and he slipped. And the water was very*



*very deep there because schooners used to come in and load and unload there and sometimes clean them out which required very deep water. And anyway he fell in there and he didn't know how to swim. And we went for help calling out to someone to come – Donny, his name was Donny, I'll never forget his name was Donny, "Donny's in the water! Donny's in the water!" And the men fished him out somehow – the men could swim of course because they were all sailors. But the girls – especially the girls couldn't swim. Terrible thing. I don't know how Mom, I don't know how she survived. If it were me, I'd be worried to pieces about having any kids out in the boat and not knowing how to swim? And no lifebelt? But we pulled through, and several times like that.*

My grandmother's mother was named Ethel Drodge. But Ethel Drodge sounds pretend, a made-up name from a novel. In my lifetime everyone has always called her Nan – her daughters, her grandchildren, her great-grandchildren. Nan was a tiny white-haired lady with a broken hip whose eyebrows remained black, even into her nineties.

Nan ran a small store and post office through the first half of the twentieth century, through the depression, through the long months of her husband's absence. Months away on a ship with no phones, no radar, only the wind to help him home. When people came into the store the first topic of conversation was always *I wonder how the men are*. But this was the only glimmer of worry that cracked Nan's strong face, that budged the beauty mark to the left of her mouth.

Nan had three daughters, Ivy, Frances, and Marcie. Names for grandmothers and great aunts, not names for girls fishing off the wharf, young women in curls and lipstick kissing soldiers goodbye. Nan raised these girls half alone in an outport without street



lamps, minded a vegetable garden and livestock to fend off the winter, kept a house and kept a store and kept waiting for another October for her husband to come home, another summer for fish and thaw. A life like war, a community of women whose husbands and fathers were far away with no word.

*We used to go to a place called Shepherd's Pond, which is known for its abundance of trout, fishing through the ice, you know. And on a nice day like today now, when the sun was shining and a good sleigh path my father always used to say to Mom "now today would be a nice day to go into Shepherd's Pond, see if we can get a trout." I can hear my father say to my mother now, "this'll be a nice day to go to Shepherd's Pond." And we weren't supposed to hear it because we wanted to go too of course and if we asked to go they'd say oh no, you have to go to school. You know, we couldn't go unless it was a Saturday. Cause we couldn't go on a Sunday because Sunday was a day to go to church.*

*Anyway, my mother told me this story, they were in Shepherd's Pond troutng and it was getting dark. And they had a team of dogs then. And on their way out they were really enjoying their trip until Mom looked ahead and saw what looked like an open body of water. And the dogs were heading for this right where the water was and my father suddenly realized too you know, what was happening, and the dogs were going so fast he couldn't stop them so he just gave Mom a push and pushed her off the sleigh, pushed her off on the ice, and the dogs went on.*



After nearly a century of stoic dignity Nan was stricken with Alzheimer's. I have no memory of her except as an old woman, frail and confused. This strong woman, who'd endured the Depression and war, stormy summers and icy winters, her husband's death, picked up her soup bowl at the dining room table and slurped out the broth, like a child. The last block of ice before the sea.

She died when I was twelve. My parents and little brother and I were on a family trip to Spain, and when we returned to our hotel in Madrid my grandmother had phoned from St. John's and left the message. Her voice – the accent, the strain – strange in a Spanish hotel room. I lay in my cot solemnly and tried to picture Nan in my head. I tried to write a poem, something in rhyme that I put in a drawer and threw out years later. I had only met her a handful of times, and all I could picture was Grandmom, herself aged, helping her mother up the stairs, in the bath, house-bound. Now she can get her own groceries, move on with her life. Moving to stay above the surface of the water.

*I can remember when - you know all about the depression don't you in the 1930's. Hard to forget that Grandmom was once a kindergarten teacher. Well see I was born in 1927 so I was very young but I can remember people coming in the shop, in our shop to get what they called a dole note filled? I can see those notes now. A sheet of paper and it was written on it flour, sugar, butter, the bare necessities for food you know. And it was welfare. It was called dole then, but they were never given money, they were just given this note to take to a store to get filled, and you could only get what was on that, bare necessities, and it wasn't very much. And I can remember when people were really hungry, and they'd come in the store, and I remember Mom used to have bags of hard*



*bread you know? For making brewis? And they would eat that hard bread over and over because they were hungry people.*

Hard bread was often eaten on ships because the rock-hard crusts would last for months without going moldy. Housewives would use it to make brewis, soaking it in water and serving it with salt fish and the grease from fat back pork. Served this way it became part of a decent meal, but cement-hard and gnawed with tea it was barely enough to keep the poor alive.

*And some of them used to go up to visit the relieving officer to get a dole note and he wouldn't give it to them. And this relieving officer was such that he got his job because he was such a hard man – that's what they say and I believe it too. You know people would go to him with their hard stories, which were true, and I know people who have walked from a place called St. Joseph's, right up to the country – oh it must be about what, God maybe twelve miles to walk, in the winter time up to his office, and he would say "now see here, you had a month's work there, in the last six months you had so many weeks work. No. I can't give you a dole note." And that man would have to turn around and walk back again, those long long distances, with nothing. No note. That used to make Pop mad.*

*That's the kind of person my father was. And you know if he had a dollar he would give half of it away you know? He couldn't stand to see someone suffering if he had anything to give him. And I've heard him say how he gave away more than one pan of flour to people who didn't have any flour to make bread. He said "I never want for anything, no. I never want for it. I've got enough to do me."*



I know the Depression from Alberta Education text books – the prairie dust bowl, the abandoned farms, people eating their horses. Drought, with hardly a drop of water for miles. My grandmother's Depression was a depression of merchants and markets, exploitation of workers, the ever dropping price of cod. Men fished for fish that did not belong to them, but to the St. John's merchants who employed them, in a place where it was possible to starve by an ocean still full of cod. The more they worked, it seemed, the further in debt they became to their employers who sold them the supplies they needed for the season. A salty wet depression.

*My father had a store, and before he could take his men to the Labrador he had to outfit them all and there were at least twelve men. Besides outfitting the schooner, besides all the ropes and all the equipment that goes on the schooner, which was you know quite a lot, and all of the food for the summer for twelve men which again was a lot, then he had to outfit the men with the oilskins and rubber boots and I don't know what else but all the clothing that you need for the whole summer.*

*And not only that, after they were gone, he had to feed the families for the summer. Twelve men. Big families. Nothing to have eight or nine children. And they used to come over to our store and Mom would have to give them credit. Whatever food they wanted, well Mom would have to supply them, in hopes that they would get a load of fish. So they were being paid in advance for money that they hoped would be forthcoming. But it wasn't always there. And there again Pop lost a lot of money because he had to pay the merchants for the goods that he had in the store, the merchants had to be paid in St. John's where he took it out from to be sold. But he wasn't getting it in from the people*



*that he employed, because they had no fish. So it was very stressful work. Stressful for everybody, stressful for their families and stressful for Mom and Dad who owned a store and were supplying those people. And quite often you know when they got home and got all their bills, the fish sold and everything and paid their bills, there wasn't that much left for the winter.*

Pop's schooner was called the *Ivy Frances*, named for his youngest daughters, and so he took his girls with him like a photograph in a pocket. A typical morning on a schooner fishing the Labrador began well before daylight. And if a day's hard work brought in a load of fish the men would have to clean it, split it, and salt it to preserve it, catching only a couple of hours sleep a night, perhaps for weeks on end.

When the salted fish was brought home in the fall Nan and the other wives would help to dry it, spreading it out on flakes in the sun. I have seen old black and white pictures of these flakes - rickety wooden platforms set up on the beach, covered with hundreds of fish lying on their backs. Their bellies split open, their white flesh exposed. The elements could be as much of an enemy to Newfoundlanders even after the men returned from sea. Several days of hot weather could scorch the fish, and sudden rainfall could be just as disastrous. Any blemish would reduce the price when the fish was finally brought to market. After a long sleepless summer of treacherous work they were never sure if they would see a profit.

*I've been in St. John's with my father when they take the load of fish out and the inspectors come down to inspect the fish? And course their job was to try to keep the*



*good fish at a minimum because those merchants didn't want to pay out that much money. They wanted to get it as cheaply as they could. The merchants would yaffle the fish. They'd look at it and they'd throw one there, and the next one in the next pile, you know. And I'd see my father now looking at em, and he'd get so mad and he couldn't say anything because actually there were hundreds and hundreds of men coming in schooners. Sometimes it was difficult to get anyone to buy a whole load of fish because there were lots of fish to be had. The merchant was almost doing you a favour, to buy your schooner load of fish you know? So you were at their mercy really.*

*And I remember saying to him one time "oh I wish you wouldn't go to Labrador anymore, why can't you stay home now." And I remember him saying to me "well maybe another year or so and I won't have to go to Labrador and I'll be able to stay home." But that last time he was down, I often heard him say about so many thousand dollars in debt, didn't make any money. No fish. And that was when he decided to sell the schooner.*

At eighteen my grandmother left Heart's Ease to be a teacher, working in other outports down the coast. And then she married Edward Bowering and moved to St. John's, and raised four boys in a house on Elizabeth Avenue. And the four boys got into scraps in Larch Place Park and played hockey and took music lessons, and grew up and married, and moved away. And Pop died and the house in Heart's Ease was shut, and sold. So somehow I was born in Alberta, to grow up liking the smell of fish, dancing to jigs and reels in celtic bars. Listening to my history on a scratchy tape, writing it like a novel. Gathering together the pieces like ballycater hugging the shore, my feet soaked through my shoes.



Grandmom's husband died when I was four, — it would seem strange to call him Grandpa because I don't remember calling him anything. He was ice-fishing with my Uncle Rex and had a heart attack, and Rex had to leave him on the ice while he ran for miles back to the road for help. He was only in his fifties. I remember what he looks like, but perhaps only from old pictures in the hallway. Something of my Uncle Scott in him; my father looks more like his mother. Grandmom has lived alone for years now, and when the porch light burned out it was months before it was replaced. Stuck inside for three days because the snow plow left a ridge of ice at the end of her driveway, sons in Edmonton and Grande Prairie and Houston. Nervous about flying since September 11<sup>th</sup>, reluctant to take her annual trip to Florida.

*This was after I met Ted and he came down for Christmas one year. I knew Mom and Dad hadn't received the gift that I had sent them for Christmas. So we decided to go to this man's house and ask him what happened to the gift that was sent home. And we could walk there, walk around the harbour, and get on to this place called Ganny's Cove fairly easily where his schooner was. He couldn't get in to the harbour because of the ice, but he could get into this place called Ganny Cove. Anyway I think we must have walked on the ice because the ice in the harbour was pretty strong. But as you went out around the mouth of the harbour it wasn't very strong so you had to be careful, you couldn't go beyond what they called the point. And so we got the gift and then we went into my aunt's house on the way, she lived not too far from there, and we were really having a good time.*



*By now it was dark, and I guess we didn't realize that we should have gotten back before dark, because you know no lights down there. So Ted said "what way will we go back? Will we go back the same way we came over." And I said "yeah but we've got to walk quite a distance to get up to there, maybe we can take a short cut and come across here at the mouth of the harbour" – where the ice breaks up quite easily and early and is not always that well frozen. So we said to a man who was standing there "do you think we could cross over there now because it would take less than half the time as what it would to go the way we went over." And he said "aw I think so. Take this stick and you can sort of pound on the ice as you walk and you can judge for yourself." So we did. And we hit the ice like that and then we'd take a step and then we'd take another step, and no lights on, only the snow was bright. And so we got over like that, and we knew it wasn't too safe and that's why we had the stick. And gosh, the next morning it was all water.*

My grandmother grew up hopping on ice pans without knowing how to swim. She can't explain that. Many of the children she grew up with did not know how to swim. Those who did learned in the ponds inland, but stayed away from the deep and dangerous water off the wharf, where the men unloaded the fish and cleaned out the ships.

She had her first swimming lesson at the age of sixty-six, because on her annual winter trips to Florida she would see her friends having so much fun in the pool. And then she found that she was afraid of the water, the clear warm pool, the visible white bottom.





*Dad grew up in the city, but spent whole summers, Christmas holidays, long weekends, fighting with his cousins for time with his grandparents, “down around the bay.”*



## The New Road

When I was small whenever I heard my father speak of Little Heart's Ease, I always thought it was "Little Heart Seas." To me this made perfect sense, the outport faced the sea, seemed little more than a step of wharf, a landing ground for ships. The village is located at the belly of a calm, slumbery harbour, with ancient floating dories, schooners in blue and red leaning into the tide. The Southwest Arm extends past the harbour, out toward the bay, three miles wide. Beyond the fingertips of this corridor of water stretches the North Atlantic. A great blue, rolling field.

Growing up I loved sitting at the kitchen table after Sunday dinner, plates dripping with pot roast and drifts of potato, listening to my father tell tales of fishing with his grandfather, "Pop," in Heart's Ease. I still do. As he tells his stories his eyes widen, he sits right up in his chair, he repeats himself, his language becomes more animated. He becomes a boy again. *And then we'd cod jig, in the summertime. And again Pop knew all the places to go. He knew where every shoal was, every rock was up and down that arm.*

My father makes a map, a model, with his wine glass, his fork and knife. Hand cupped for the bay, napkin for the harbour, salt for Caplin Cove. Little Heart's Ease was here. Dad grew up in the city, but spent whole summers, Christmas holidays, long weekends, fighting with his cousins for time with his grandparents, "down around the bay." This was the entrance to the arm, and just around the head of the arm was a little outport called House Cove.



*But, ah, it didn't have a harbour it was just a cove, and if the wind was blowing up the bay, it would blow right in, right in the face of House Cove. But having said that it was a beautiful place, they had just a fantastic beach. Big rounded beach rocks. Just gorgeous. But not much place for boats to land. You could put a stage there and geez, every winter you'd be putting a new one there, the ice flows would come and take it. There was no protection.*

House Cove was isolated at the top of the arm, and the only road there was a dirt track that ran along the rocky coast. It was faster and easier to access the outport by sea, and when a gale blew up it might have been on the other side of the earth.

In 1949 the infamous Joey Smallwood became the first premier of Newfoundland. He is known for the legacies of confederation, industrialisation, and relocation, and once declared that he “dragged Newfoundlanders kicking and screaming into the twentieth century.” He announced that fishing was dead, that the only hope for impoverished Newfoundlanders was to join Canada, give up fishing, get a job in the new boot factory. “Resettlement” was a program prompted by the voluntary migration of some outport people into larger centers, and the number of requests for government assistance in making such moves. But while the program allotted people \$1000 to move, it stipulated that everyone in the community must agree to move at once; it would be pointless and extravagant to continue funding the schools and services in the tiny isolated communities up and down the coast. This policy meant that those who did not want to move felt forced into resettling by both their neighbours and their government. The people did not have much choice about where they could move, but were forced to relocate to designated “growth centres.” The people were not told that the unemployment rate in the new centers



was already 20%, that in many of these communities the fishing grounds were reserved for long-time residents. People who had only ever been fishermen lost the only livelihood they knew. By the time the program ended in the 70's, more than 250 communities had disappeared. My father remembers his grandfather getting mad at the news, frustrated for friends without jobs, stuck out on mud flats with no work and no compensation for the life they had built, and lost. In House Cove, the homes that they had built were simply shut and abandoned.

*So I remember as a boy, the big excitement was when the L\_\_\_s, were going to be getting this house from House Cove. The house was a perfectly good house, they just left it, and House Cove must have been abandoned about – maybe about ten years before this. It wasn't that long, so the house was still in reasonably good shape – may have needed a coat of paint but otherwise it was perfectly usable, needed a roof and that but you know these people didn't have any other income so they were going to get this house. And so the trick was to get it out. And I remember it was up on a little bit of a rise, and I went out there to see, because Pop was going out there so we all went out to see what was going on.*

They stripped the inside of the house, and braced the corners with logs so that it wouldn't collapse. My father watched eagerly as twenty men or more helped to put logs under the foundation of the house; in Newfoundland there were usually no basements and the foundations of the houses were built up on pilings so they sat off the ground. Once the logs were in place underneath the cross beams they chopped down the pilings and the house came down on the logs, like a great beast sitting itself down. Horses and men began pulling the house down the hill with ropes, herding it toward the water. A few men



pulled from behind the house, in the opposite direction, so that the building wouldn't get away from them and start rolling down the hill too fast. They would pull a few feet and then go around the back and take the logs that the house had rolled off, and bring them around to the front. They got the house down to the beach that day. They couldn't just put the house on a truck and drive it down the arm to Heart's Ease. Like everything else, the house had to go by sea.

*And then they waited for the weather – the weather had to be good. I seem to remember that it was a couple of days before we went back, we went out in the boat. Then once they got the house to the water's edge they actually then lashed the logs to the house. So that was like the flotation. And there were several motor boats pulling it. When the house went in the water it sank, it must have been about three feet. I remember - aw geez I remember it to this day because the water was about maybe halfway up the door. And it was a two storey house, it was fairly you know substantial. And I'll never forget, I said "is she gonna sink? Is she gonna sink?" And my grandfather "no no, she'll just drop down about three feet b'y, and she'll level off."*

They pulled the house out around the head of the arm and into the little cove at Heart's Ease, my father and the other children watching it bobbing in the water. They pulled it in toward the flats, where the land was only about three feet above sea level. They managed to pull the house up on to the land with horses, put it up on a new foundation and left it there to dry out. Like a wet pair of shoes. The family probably purchased the house, but for an extremely low price. The original owners would not have expected to get anything from it at all.



*It was a part of the community that nobody really wanted because it was the flats. So if you had a really high tide you could probably float the house again! So it wasn't a very desirable area. But in those days land where it wasn't staked off really was pretty easily claimed by somebody else. Particularly if it wasn't desirable land.*

I don't know how many houses Pop saw moved this way in his lifetime, how many rooms with watermarks three feet above ground. If he saw the poetry in a house bobbing up and down in the sea, or if he saw just a friend with a new home, and another man without one.

Pop was perhaps more of a poet than either Jean Chaulk or John Bowering. He didn't just write about dramatic shipwrecks; he wrote poems about all of his experiences in life, positive and negative, life-changing and ordinary. But none of his poetry survives. Once a poem was written and read aloud, he simply threw it away. A poem wasn't a big deal, my father tells me, wasn't something to be kept and saved. It was just something to pass the time. A temporary performance, like the showing of a play.

*Where was it we were going – Swift Current, Newfoundland. And there were cabins there. Beautiful beach, fine sand. And I remember we went there with all the family and Pop and Nan. And we had a great time. I think it rained one day but anyway – coming back, Pop wrote a poem about the whole holiday, in the car. And by the time we were back in St. John's he had the poem written and it was pages and pages about everything we had done, and it was all in rhyme. Oh it was funny. He wrote a lot of poems about – just sort of basic rhyme – about the stuff he'd done. I'm sure at the end of that trip, once he'd read it out he didn't care for it anymore and just tossed it.*



Pop had plenty to write about through the years. Like any Newfoundland fisherman he had his share of scrapes and near misses. Out cod jigging in the arm, the two of them alone in an open boat, Pop would tell my father tales of his adventures.

One fall, after a season on the Labrador, Pop was sailing his schooner through the Narrows into St. John's harbour in the middle of a raging autumn storm. The schooner careened and tilted in the waves, gale winds whipping through the sails. As the wind caught the sails the boom, the horizontal spar attached to the bottom edge of a sail, swung back and forth from its pivot on the mast. As Pop steered the ship into the harbour, the boom came around with a gust and snapped his leg in two.

Since Nan ran the wireless station, when the crew or the doctors wired to Heart's Ease to tell his family of the accident, she was the one who got the message, letter by letter, as it came over the line. Headphoned, leaning over the telegraph key, listening to the clicks formed by electric pulses. Finger wagging right for dits, left for dahs. Holding her breath till the whole message appeared in a pattern of dashes and dots.

*Pop would go out in a hurricane.*

Pop used to go out fishing with a man named Soper, just as fearless, or crazy, depending on your perspective. He took Soper because no one else would go out in the weather that Pop braved. Climbing into the boat and the old salty dogs would chuckle, *you aren't going out in this, are ya skipper?*

On one trip somehow Soper, who couldn't swim, fell in to the water. Pop jumped in after him and fished him out. But once they had climbed back into the boat they



realized that soaking wet from the icy Atlantic water, in the dead of winter, they wouldn't make it back to Heart's Ease alive. In water that cold it takes less than fifteen minutes for hypothermia to set in, skin becoming pale and waxy, limbs numb and shivering uncontrollably. Movements clumsy and awkward. They pulled in to the closest bit of beach, miles from the nearest village. Once on shore they lit a fire with gasoline, took off their oilskins and sat naked by the fire, bright white bodies glowing in the fire, wet chest hair pasted to their skin. They waited nude on the beach, roasting their clothes in the fire, turning them in their fingers on makeshift spits. Finally they were warm and dry enough to make it back, reeking of smoke, spark holes in their oilskins.

Every summer, every Christmas holidays, my father would pine to be out in Heart's Ease. The trip from St. John's to the outport took about five hours in those days, long itchy car rides sequestered with brothers in the back seat, an endless ribbon of humdrum tree wrapping the side windows, teeth chattering with gravel rumbles, restless legs kicking against the back of the dusty upholstered seat. Seats lined with comic books and card games, papers of tic-tac-toe and hangman. In places the route was dangerous. In the summertime the car would inch through a stream of muddy soup, in the wintertime the road became a treacherous slope of sheer ice. My father's father would fishtail his way up the hill in his 1960's baby blue meteor, a big winged whale blubbering across the icy road. On one side of the road was a wall of looming, impenetrable rock. On the other, a sheer drop like the edge of the world, the sea bubbling and gurgling below.

*And one time Dad said "I'm going to try this, but I don't want you in the car." So Mom, and myself, and Rex, and Dale, the four of us, got out of the car, and we waited at*



*the foot of the hill while Dad tried to get up the hill. He did that cause if the car went over in the ditch at least he wouldn't have the family with him. And then we walked up the hill when he got to the top.*

*It was a five hour trip. Now it's only an hour and three quarters. And geez I hated making that trip because it was so long, and at the same time you wanted to be down there. But it was dusty, and potholes, and it was a dirt road, none of it was paved. And if it had rained, the mud was up to the axles. It literally made the road impassable sometimes. So lots of times we wouldn't go because the weather was not great, wouldn't take a chance on that road.*

When Dad was in Little Heart's Ease he often played with the Soper boys: Stan, who was my father's age, a younger brother, and two older boys. The group would head out in a big 25-foot skiff, Viking explorers or barbarous pirates, awaiting the smash of waves as they came around the head of the bay. The motor was started by yanking on a fly-wheel, a full bodied heave on the cumbrous cord. The older boys would laugh when Dad, skinny like string, tried to pull it. The boys would sometimes head across the arm to play in St. Jones Without, an old outport abandoned during Resettlement. They would poke through the dilapidated houses, pushing back the boards that covered over windows and doors. Eerily quiet, lair for ghosts or pirate smugglers, rooms of rats and spiderwebs. Hiding in dark parlours with lifting wallpaper, floorboards groaning, the flapping of birds between attic beams.

*But there were several communities up and down the arm - Loreburn was one, St. Jones Without was another, and House Cove, and Island Cove was another, that people*



were moved out. The original road went down the arm, it followed the coast line. The road was very curvy and built literally into the side of the cliff and these cliffs were hundreds of feet high. And some sections you were literally looking at a cliff above you, a cliff below you, and maybe a guard rail, sometimes not. And the road was very narrow and talk about blind corners. There were some of them that we would approach blowing the horn. Blowing the horn. Because there was no other way to let cars know that you were coming. And you'd come right around it on a ninety degree turn, and if you happened to hit anything, you were 150 feet to the water below. Anyway so I remember we'd pass Island Cove and it was built on a bit of a hill and the road was above it and you could look down and you'd see the houses - nobody living there, but you could see the houses.

Sometimes the boys would stand at the end of Pop's wharf and have connor fishing competitions, trying to catch the spiny scavengers that swarmed around the dock edge for the guts of cleaned fish. It didn't take much to catch them, just an unbaited hook, and there were so many that it was no trouble to catch a hundred in a day. Each boy would line his fish up along the wharf to count them, to see who got the biggest ones. No one ate the ugly spiny fish, but when they threw them back into the water the surviving connors did.

Other days Dad would help the other boys turning the fish on the flakes, and tried to climb on the rickety frames until he was told to get down. Swatting away the swarms of flies, pinching his nose against the sour fishy reek, a smell like nothing else.



When he wasn't playing with the other kids, Dad and Pop would go out across the arm in a sixteen-foot open boat. And as his grandfather steered out toward the bay my father would be looking up at the sky for signs of bad weather. Trinity Bay is a long stretch of sea, fifty kilometres wide. If Dad could see whitecaps, great waves cresting into white foam, he would get up in the fore-cuddy under the gunnels. The gunnels were the railings that went around the top of the boat, and at the bow a small area was planked over, level with the gunnels. This was the fore-cuddy, which was used for storage, and provided some protection from the waves crashing over the bow of the boat. There was just enough space here for a small boy to crouch amongst the jiggers. They always had an oilskin on board – a canvas coat waterproofed with oil – and if Pop pulled it up Dad *knew we were in for it*. The boat would dip down and come up again, rocking sideways over the waves and down in the troughs. Dad swallowing his stomach, studying his grandfather's face. Even in the foulest weather Pop would be sitting smiling and whistling – my father knew he should be really worried if Pop ever got a concerned look.

*And he did that right until the day he died. He had that kind of outdoors life, he always wanted to be on the boat. And of course they were plank boats – he wouldn't have a fiberglass boat it was plank. And I hated it. Because I'd want to be out in it and of course it required a lot of maintenance. And you'd be scraping the paint, and then she'd be in the shed all winter so in the spring of course before you put her in the water you had to pitch and oakum the boat.*

After a winter in the shed the boat would be dried out, and gaps would open up between the planks. My father's job was to take a chisel and stuff the oakum, a loose hemp rope, into these spaces, where they would expand once wet. My father would bend



over the boat's curved spine, diligently poking at the itchy rough rope, stuffing it in between the planks. Once it was in they would seal it with pitch and paint.

*And Pop said make sure you do that right because you don't want to be out in the bay and have that leaking. So geez, I'm pushing that stuff in there I mean, yeah I'm thinking I don't want to be out in the bay when that stuff comes out.*

Once the chore was done Pop would check Dad's work, and then they would be out in the boat again, jigging for cod. They would stand sideways against the gunnels, one arm outstretched with the line, waddling back and forth from one foot to the other to bounce the jigger up and down in the water. As the unbaited hook danced up the fish were attracted to it, and then followed the hook down toward the bottom, only to be hooked in as the hook came up again. Every fisherman had his own pace, his own rhythm.

*Drop it down to the bottom, two arm lengths up, and away you go. And you knew when you had something there. Sometimes it would be a cod, sometimes it would be a squid, and occasionally it would be a sculpin. Ugly, ugly little fish. And of course you'd get into a rhythm. But every time you came up, of course there'd be a stream of water that came up on the line, and so you had to get the right pace and the right stance cause otherwise every time the jigger came up you'd get that constant stream of water.*

Dad holds his arms up in the air at the table, and chuckles. *So you had to hold it up like this... cause if you did it like this you'd get a face full of water.* You had to be careful when you brought up a catch – if it was a squid on the line you might get a face full of ink. The cod came up heavy and limp, grey green skin flashing, a small beard like a crabby troll. My father has an old jigger hanging on the wall in the basement, an artifact



of time past, before automated jigging systems and the death of the fishery. But now I can see him standing next to his grandfather, dancing the jigger up and down, listening to stories the same way that I am listening to him now.

*Pop was a commando in the First World War. He would be put ashore in a rubber boat, and their task was to raid. He wouldn't talk about that too much, you know. I just remember that his First World War rifle was a 303 Enfield. He gave it to Dad as a hunting rifle. I used it once and then you know geez this thing doesn't shoot anymore. So I brought it down to the gun shop and he looked at it and he said the rifling's gone in it. That's a lot of bullets.*

Pop was in Halifax in December of 1917, when a cargo ship full of explosives collided with a Belgian vessel in the harbour. The ship immediately caught fire, and was propelled by the impact toward the busy port. Spectators rushed toward the harbour to catch a glimpse of the burning ship. Twenty minutes later it exploded, killing 1900 people instantly, injuring 9000 more, and destroying 325 acres of the city. Pieces of the ship were cascaded across the harbour, and what wasn't levelled was burning.

*And I don't remember the details but I remember he was away from the harbour, and the explosion happened. Cause the explosion flattened most of Halifax around the harbour. And so when the explosion occurred he said he was running towards the devastation.*

The explosion left thousands of people homeless, soldiers on shore with nowhere to go. Hospitals could not begin to cope. The following day the city was struck by a blizzard, and sixteen inches of snow covered over the ruins. Within a year the death toll



had risen to well over 2000. I don't know where my great-grandfather went as he ran toward the chaos, if he made tourniquets, helped people out of burning buildings, or simply wandered in a daze.

*And I remember as a boy him telling me – people without arms and legs and basically just blown to pieces. But he never went into more detail and I don't think he liked to talk about that.*

There are some things that he probably could never write about, could never put into words.

I used to think that the Southwest Arm was the peninsula that jutted out into Trinity Bay, the strip of land on which Little Heart's Ease sits. Only recently did I realize that the arm was the water, the inlet between Heart's Ease to the south and another peninsula to the north. I had always been told that Heart's Ease was located on the Southwest Arm, and I assumed that this location referred to land, a bit of solid ground. It turned out to be the other way around, the life of the town rested on its harbour, its piece of ocean. My father doesn't even know if the peninsula has a name.

Pop had a large complex of buildings on his property. The house was up on a hill, about a hundred feet from the water's edge. Leading up to it a trail crisscrossed up the bank, through the buildings. My father's napkin map is dismantled, rearranged to a blueprint of the property. Fork for a wharf, glass for a shed.

*And there were three wharves there when I started going there. One had sort of semi-fallen into disrepair and so you wouldn't go on it. And one was a big long wharf with the schooner tied up. And there was an L-shaped shed on the water itself, and then*



*about that was a sawmill. And then above that again on the road level were a couple of small warehouses and shed. And over the course of time Pop one by one pulled down the buildings.*

By the time my father was a young man most of the buildings had not been used for years, were weathered and falling down. The schooner sold, the sawmill shut, there was no need to repair the small warehouses. But when my father was in medical school he and his dad decided to build a new wharf, so that they could use it on the weekends to go out in the boat. Every weekend for a few years the two of them would go out and cut down the enormous timbers and drag them out of the bush, or collect the remnants of other wharves that washed up on the shore. Pop was in his early eighties then, but was right in there with them, chopping down the trees, driving the pilings down into the ocean floor. It had to be strong enough to bear the ice flows that would come in in the wintertime.

*But one time we were running out of timbers. Well Pop knew where the tall trees were – I guess it must go back to the time of building boats and stuff like that so he knew where to find them. Actually I know where it was, it was out by Island Cove. Cause there was a little creek that came down over the hill, and the trees grew really tall and straight there. Plus we had the little narrow creek bed that we could use – if it was clear, it could get the trees down. So we spent all day getting these trees and we had like a huge raft, two layers, of timbers. And it was slow going – Pop had a twenty horsepower motor on his boat. And we set off back down to Heart's Ease.*

They had travelled a mile or two when the engine stopped. They had run out of gas, because the drag of the timbers was straining the motor beyond its capacity. They



weren't far from Hodges Cove, but knew that they could never row in with the enormous raft dragging behind them.

*So just off Hodges Cove right before the harbour is an island. Fortunately the way the wind was blowing was more in our favour so we figured that the log raft would drift towards that island. So we cut the thing loose, and rowed in to Hodges Cove. Now by this point it was getting late in the evening. And Mom was just about going up the wall cause here's Dale, Rex, myself, Dad and Pop. Five of the most important people in her life at that point, and we're overdue. Caplin Cove is next to Hodges Cove, she phoned people that she knew in Caplin Cove and no, they hadn't seen us. So she phoned Hodges Cove and somebody actually went out on the point with their binoculars and "yeah, I see them, they're out there." So when we got to Hodges Cove the person that she phoned, Uncle So-and-so, was waiting for us on the wharves, "Frances phoned, she's kind of upset, but don't worry I told her that you were okay, that you were rowing in."*

They gambled right, and when they made it back to the island the raft had lodged itself there. The party finally made it back to Heart's Ease sometime after dark, and the next day were back labouring on the new wharf. Perhaps Pop wrote a poem about the trip, the funny story of the five men sheepishly rowing in to shore. Perhaps he read it to his grandsons, before throwing it in the fire. Pop had no need to keep his poems, to pass them down. No need to create a legacy, to save words that they may live on after death. Still chopping wood in his eighties, Pop could almost make time stand still.

The new road to Heart's Ease is smoother, straighter. But the house is gone now, and living in Alberta, my father hasn't made the trip in years.



*And Chapel Arm, Norman's Cove you don't even drive through them now because they're on the coast, but again in those days before the Trans-Canada was built the road followed the coastline. And I remember that Chapel Arm and Norman's Cove was like a welcome relief, because there was something besides green trees, and rock. Two small communities and they weren't quite half way. But okay, you're getting there. And the next stop was Goobies, and Goobies was always fun, because by that time you'd been on the road for about three and a half to four hours. And we were all in pretty sad shape. So at Goobies we got to go in for chips. It was like a trailer that you could pull the awning up, it was like something you'd see at the Fringe almost, it was a portable kitchen. Great french fries. Goobies. And it was only open in the summertime. And then they built it up into a more substantial place now, so they opened a motel they added to it after a while. But the french fries were never as good.*

Pop died of a stroke at the age of 86. In his later years he had high blood pressure, but didn't like his medicine because he said it made him tired. My father doesn't know if he was taking it. The day he died Pop was out in the woods, cutting down a tree. My father, the physician, trades the boy's voice for a clinical one. *Probably had a hypertensive bleed.* To me he just died the way he lived. They always say how peaceful it would be to die in your sleep. I doubt that Pop would have preferred that. Pop died wide awake.



Once the highway was built there wasn't much reason to drive by Island Cove anymore. But the town still sat there, quieter now, the way that grass grows over old cemeteries.

*And I think the reason the houses were still there was because it was so difficult because of the way Island Cove was built up on a sort of a steep hill – you couldn't get the houses out of it. You needed more of a gentle slope. But the houses in Island Cove were there a long time. And after they moved the road, you could still see the houses, falling down.*

My father never took the road down into Island Cove. As with all abandoned outports, the roads were bulldozed away after the residents left, the houses simply emptied and abandoned. And then the path was barred, so that you could never go back.



## The Rock

I'd like to carry a box of sea  
get it through airport security  
to this saltless ground blue for sky alone  
so solid an earth out of range of fault lines  
tsunami

In St. John's they drink fresh water from Rennie's River  
lick saline mist off lips  
taste Atlantic in breathing

Some call it the rock

My grandfather tells of the boyhood friend who jumped over the gap in the cliff path, how rock and body gave way, fell into the bay as my grandfather watched, chest forward to follow. Even stone is fluid.

My ancestors are buried in ground  
on hills where no one minds the wind  
chapped bones marked by stone slabs

In an elegant Alberta restaurant eating mussels in white wine I get sand between my teeth, rocks too small to be called rocks, so fine that in the context of sun it can be called soft, under the arch of the foot

Bury me at sea  
let my body bloat with ocean  
drift up the coast to Labrador  
reside in bellies of pollock  
tide of sand



**Here**

They screeched me in  
because I was born to a March of snow  
where water freezes almost to the bottom  
born the day before my mother  
for two weeks she held me in  
wanting a daughter for her birthday  
but the doctor induced me into my new prairie world

They screeched me in  
at twenty-one initiated into a family  
with sea-legs from the cradle  
born upon the bright blue sea  
with caplin in my pocket  
and the dark rum down my throat  
born on a day in August  
*Is ye a screecher?*

They screeched him in  
because he could have been a cowboy  
they had caribou, anyway  
and leather boots  
and they got their Christmas trees from the woods  
born to an April of snow  
We weren't even engaged yet  
but they knew our eyes  
    my grandmother gave us one room  
    with two single beds

They screeched him in  
initiated into the family  
with caplin in his pocket  
kiss a cod (no cod  
    so instead the arse of a plastic puffin)  
born on a day in August  
*Is ye a screecher?*



They screeched us in together  
at a pub called Nautical Nellie's  
as if I had not written poems about the sea  
as if I didn't know all the words to Lukey's Boat  
as if I hadn't laid awake nights telling him  
of my grandfather's fiddle  
because my mother had deposited me  
on dry land  
nearer to bison and grain elevators  
nearer to love  
I showed him Quidi Vidi and Signal Hill  
and we drank with my parents on George Street  
(He had initiated me  
quading through ditches and tree branches  
his arms and legs around me, my eyes closed)

I am from nowhere but here

We screeched into this union  
thick rum down our throats  
our someday children yet without place  
Listening to him try to say  
*'deed I is me fine old cock*  
*and long may your big jib draw*



~ ~ ~

Prairie bound my mother sings along to opera c.d.'s, bright kitchen, cleaning up from an Indian meal. Or to my father's trilly broadway tunes on the piano. Somewhere in the piano bench, between my old Royal Conservatory study books and a copy of Gordon Lightfoot's greatest hits, is the music to old Newfoundland folk songs. "I'se the B'y," "The Ode to Newfoundland," "Lukey's Boat." And my favourite, an obscure tune by a Willy Arsenault, called "Twillingate Island."

*Tis pretty to be on Twillingate Island  
On a Newfoundland coast, in the month of July  
To Walk along Wild Cove, overlooking Burnt Island  
and to fish in the sun, 'neath the clear blue sky*

My mother's voice is sure and clear, a confidant vibrato. I remember learning that in the early 70's, with her long curly hair ironed straight on her mother's ironing board, she sang folk tunes in a St. John's coffee shop. I excitedly imagined that my mother was once a Bohemian. Less romantically, she also sang "Raindrops Keep Falling on my Head," with a group of eight other girls called the *Triple Trio* on TV, and she sang for the patients in the old TB Sanatorium, known in St. John's as "the san."

My mother has always been a performer. Five years old and her father taught her to sing, to the tune of the "Toréador Song" from *Carmen*,

*Tor-ay-ah-dora*



*don't spit on the floor-ah  
Use the poscador-ah  
that's what it's for-ah.*

Standing on a stool, smiling coyly, she'd move on to "Frankie and Johnny."

*Frankie and Johnny were lovers  
Brother how those two could love...*

She didn't have a clue what the song was about but had memorized it perfectly, and her father's friends would laugh and laugh. And she didn't know why. But she liked it.

My parents left Newfoundland in 1977, so my father could complete his medical residency at the U of A. They were two of thousands of Newfoundlanders that left the province in the 70's and 80's. My mother's brother had already moved to Winnipeg, and in the coming years her sister would move to Fort St. John, Dad's brother to Houston and another brother to Grande Prairie. They followed a long line of migrants, aunts and uncles who had moved to Vancouver in the 60's, an aunt who moved to Calgary in the 40's, a great-great uncle who had moved to Massachusetts in the 1910's. My uncle Les stayed, but his three daughters are flung to Halifax, Victoria, and England. The population of Newfoundland has been steadily dropping for decades. Some say that out-migration is as much a part of the Newfoundland experience as salt fish and tea.

*Oh why did I leave home for to go to Toronto  
Cause I don't like the crowds, and I get no fresh air  
And it's now that I'm thinkin' to be better off fishin'  
than breakin' my back, cause this factory don't care.*

*...So come along home boys, through the road to the islands  
Across Dildo run, along Friday Bay.  
Come if you're from Tilt Cove, or you're from Moreton's Harbour  
or your home is in Fogo, all across in Hare Bay*



The Newfoundland kitchen party originated in old drafty houses with wood stoves in the kitchen, the only source of heat. Family and friends would gather at the table, fire stoked, and tell tall tales, sing songs, and play instruments to entertain themselves. Often a Newfoundland party is simply called a “time.”

My Uncle Les owns a summer cottage in the small outport of New Harbour, about an hour from St. John’s. When I was growing up whenever we went back to Newfoundland for a vacation, we always spent a weekend in New Harbour, boiling fresh-caught lobsters, garlic butter streaming down our chins. And after supper we always gathered around the fireplace, someone handing out songbooks, someone else pouring Screech and coke. And everyone would sing the best of Newfoundland folk songs, not always well but always enthusiastically. My mother harmonized with her guitar, my grandfather played the fiddle, my Uncle Les played the mandolin. Sometimes my Uncle Tom would play the very un-traditional tiny electric keyboard with keys meant for miniature fingers. Aunt Glenys would shout out the next lines for those who didn’t know the words, and my father would play the “ugly stick,” a percussion instrument made out of an old mop strung with bottle caps that jangled and thumped as it was drummed on the floor. We weren’t in the kitchen, and the cabin had an outdoor pool. But it seemed to be as authentic a Newfoundland “time” as you could get.

My cousins and I knew that our parents were tipsy when the ugly stick was flipped upside down for a waltz with the lady with flowing grey hair. We looked at each other and rolled our eyes, and went back to our game of UNO. But I loved the sound of the music, the heat of the room on my face, eyes drooping with sleep. Sometimes we would



sing too, when we weren't too cool, in tiny timid voices inaudible over the squeak of instruments and my mother's mellow voice. And the chorus, simple and strong,

*Fogo and Twillingate, I'm comin' home  
Fogo and Twillingate, I'm comin' home*

I didn't even know where Fogo and Twillingate were, but there was something about the way my mother sang that song that made me determined to come home too, and stay there forever. A cast-away in my grandparents' basement, an exile returned.



~ ~ ~

Interior, my mother's kitchen. I am sitting at the table with my Nanny (my mother's mother), her sister Alice, my grandfather. As we talk Nanny is playing with the apples in the centre of the table, turning each one around and around, first stems up at attention, then stems down, one by one, revealing bristly stars.

Nanny is in her late seventies, short and round, but one of those elderly women that you can see was once beautiful. Her eyes are a pale liquid blue, her features fine between soft pockets of skin. Aunty Alice is her older sister, but healthier, sharp, with a memory like a cod trap and a thin, keen face. Grandpa is bald on top, with wild grey wisps shooting up around his head like fireworks smoke. A big jowly smile and the belt of his trousers cutting across the middle of his round belly.

Aunty Alice lives in the house next door to Nanny and Grandpa, and they watch out for each other, have dinner together, get groceries together. It would make sense for Alice to move in with her sister, but she likes her independence, has never married, likes to do things her own way. She is still big sister, quietly correcting their memories, tsking Grandpa's jokes.

*NANNY: My mother died when I was two.*

*GRANDPA: Yes but then you had a step mother –*

*NANNY: Yes I had a stepmother*



*AUNTY ALICE: - when she was eight.*

*NANNY: I was eight, eight years old? My father remarried when I was eight years old.*

*AUNTY ALICE: And in between, we had Grandmother Godley look after us, after mother died, for I don't know how long, wasn't very long before she died.*

Nanny turns the apples again, their green waxy skins thudding against the glass bowl, up, down. Aunty Alice reaches into the middle of the table and drags the bowl away from her sister, without pausing in her sentence.

*AUNTY ALICE: After that, Nanny Lever would come over and we had a maid, Nanny Lever and Grandfather Lever come to live with us.*

*NANNY: What's her name?*

*AUNTY ALICE: Whose name?*

*NANNY: That, that maid, first maid we had? You have a better memory than I do.*

*ALICE: I don't know, we had so many.*

Grandpa delights in teasing them both. When I was little he liked to recite distorted nursery rhymes – I thought it was hilarious when he said *Jack and Jill went up the hill to fetch a bottle of coke*. I didn't realize what was implied at the end when *Jack gave her a little poke!* When he finds an opportunity he will make a dubious comment and then chuckle to himself, forearms resting on the table, back curled forward. And if no one reacts he repeats it in case you couldn't hear him – a survival skill he probably learned living with his wife over the years.

Nanny beeps when you hug her. I have come to expect this, with the soft loose texture of her cheek, the warmth of her middle. She always jumps in surprise, and then



she adjusts her hearing aid, and laughs. My grandmother often cannot hear her husband when he makes a sly comment or tells a lewd joke, but she knows the twinkle in his eye well enough to scold him with a finger wag, and a tip of her chin down to look at him with the top of her eyes. Yet though she feigns innocence, she too has a sharp wit, delights in her own shocking comments.

Cut to a roadside restaurant in a Newfoundland town. It is the first time that Nanny has met my future husband Kent, and they are sitting beside each other at lunch. She has ordered cod tongues, a Newfoundland delicacy, fried, soft and mucousy. Kent has not tried them before, though later he will compare them to fried snot. Nanny turns to Kent, confidentially, with a mischievous twinkle in her eye. *Want a little tongue?*

*ME: [to Nanny]. And what did your father do?*

*GRANDPA: Travelling salesman.*

*NANNY: Hardware, hardware for how many years?*

*ALICE: I don't remember how many years.*

*GRANDPA: Well he was at it when he was eighty years old. He was working.*

*ALICE: He started down to Martin Hardware.*

*GRANDPA: Fifty years travelling. At least fifty years.*

*NANNY: Everybody knew him! "Billy Lever, Billy Lever!"*

*GRANDPA: Oh yes.*

*NANNY: All across the country.*

*GRANDPA: Even today you'd go out and -*

*NANNY: Everybody knew him.*



*GRANDPA: –somebody say, you know you say something about Billy Lever. “Oh yes, Billy, we called him Billy.”*

*ALICE: Very outgoing. I don’t know where they got me.*

*NANNY: I wonder where they got you!*

*ALICE: I don’t know, I guess Harold was that way too.*

*NANNY: There was no fun in ya.*

*ALICE: No.*

*NANNY: Never tell a joke...*

*GRANDPA: She crawled out from under a rock!*

*NANNY: There was one good thing about her though. Often we’d all go up to LeMarchant Road then you know boys and girls and then you’d pair off you know. Comin’ down then she’d always wait by the candy store on the corner, you or Harold, and then come home together so Mother never knew who I was in love with! Oh my! Fun and games.*

*MOM: Who were you out with?*

*NANNY: Oh just our own crowd you know. People I went to school with.*

*ALICE: Lots of boyfriends.*

*NANNY: I was a good girl.*

*GRANDPA: Yes but nobody ever found out what you were good for!*

*NANNY: Well you did, you asked me to marry ya! [He laughs]. Oh gee, I’ll get you for that.*





*My grandmother's family is somehow related to the Lever Empire in England, founder of Sunlight Soap, Monkey Brand, and Vim. But no one really knows how we are related to that other William Lever, Lord Leverhulme of England, born the same year as my great-great grandfather, probably never called Billy in his life.*



## Sunlight

In the 20's and 30's people set their clocks by the noonday gun on Signal Hill, a white puff that, a second later, rumbled across the city. Cross-checked with pocket watches, mahogany grandfather clocks, mantelpiece chimes. Part of the rhythm of the day, perhaps the call to dinner, the sound of soup and tea. The recess at St. Thomas' school, where my Nanny set down her arithmetic.

And horses, clopping down dusty streets, around potholes the size of fishing holes, the screech of the streetcar straining up the hill, the trickle of water from streetside public water stations into hooped tin buckets.

A whistle on the platform, and Billy Lever would catch a train from the St. John's railway station, a big stone building, lined up in front with black taxis, echoing with the chatter of tourists, the groan of baggage. The station crowded with baymen back from the ice, fine-suited merchants, children, fingers sticky with candy, molasses-mouthed. The conductor with a coal stove voice, *all aboard that's goin' aboard!* The cough of steam, and the slow clack of wheels over the rail joints. From here Billy would travel the 547 miles of track, through Newfoundland's marshes and woodland, barren hills and coastal cliffs, to towns and outports across the island.

He might travel through Trinity loop, where the track circled a small pond, dropping thirty-four feet, running through a valley to the town of Trinity, the train's



length visible in his window, like a snake looking at its own tail. On to Port Rexton, Wood Spur, Port Union Junction, Catalina, to Elliston, where my great-grandmother was born. Selling nails and table saws perhaps at Tilley's store. Sleeping in a boarding house or with a kind family, whose price included breakfast and a supper called tea, beef frosted with fat, briny cabbage. The travelling salesmen in this time would get to know people in towns all across the island, and would find in each outport a friendly face to greet them, with a warm fire in the kitchen and a pot of strong tea. The outport people thrived on the new faces that the railroad brought, and Billy was full of news and tales from the city.

My grandmother's family is somehow related to the Lever Empire in England, founder of Sunlight Soap, Monkey Brand, and Vim. My uncle has traced the Lever family tree back another three generations from Billy Lever, to William Lever Senior, to James, to one Richard Lever born in 1780. But no one really knows how we are related to that other William Lever, Lord Leverhulme of England, born the same year as my great-great grandfather, probably never called Billy in his life. William Lever, also son of James, like the Levers of a parallel universe.

Family lore says that when they were small, Nanny and Alice's uncle Tom received a letter from lawyers in England. When he saw the return address, Lever Brothers, Port Sunlight, England, he declared "If they wanted to contact us they should have done it years ago." Without even opening the envelope he threw the letter into the fire. No one knows what it said, or why he reacted so bitterly. There has been speculation that it told of a will, leaving the family a piece of the Lever estate, a share of the



This is to certify that James Lewis, Bachelor of Divinity, of the University of Cambridge, was admitted to the Bar on the twenty-first day of December, in the year of our Lord, one thousand eight hundred and forty-eight, as above.

John Lewis

Witnessed by James Lewis  
John Lewis  
Date & place  
mark

Witnessed by James Lewis  
John Lewis  
Date & place  
mark

Extracted from the Bar Register of the Bar of England



company, or some other such treasure. A reconciliation after some unknown wrong, promise of reunion and goodwill. Burnt to a romantic crisp, like a destroyed treasure map.

I first learned the expression “claim to fame” in Ms. Karole’s grade one class, when she asked all of the children to think of their claim to fame and share it with the class. The only thing that I could come up with was that I had a great-great aunt who was 104. Then Elise Mulligan stood up and said that she had an aunt who was 105. Other children bragged that they had once met Mr. Dressup, or that their Dad was on TV. When I learned some time later that my family was somehow descended from Lancashire aristocracy and a famous soap company, that the Sunlight dish detergent beneath the sink could have been our connection to fame and fortune, it was like an affirmation that my family was interesting. What I brought up when a friend told me she is a direct descendant of Horatio Nelson, or when Kent first mentioned he might be an illegitimate descendant of Louis Riel. Everyone’s family has some such obscure claim at greatness.

I have spent many hours on the Internet searching for any information on the Levers who came to Newfoundland, when, who they were, how they were related to the soap family. Whole evenings scrolling unsuccessfully through pages and pages of genealogical message boards.

*Searching for John J. Attridge, from Ireland, married to Elizabeth Doyle...*

*Searching for my paternal grandfather, Henry Lever Ferguson, who is believed to have died in Canada about 1939...*

*Would like to know about the family of Kizziah Harmon, wife of William Lever. Their son*



*John Wade Belton Lever is buried at...*

*I'm looking for Charles Hopper who worked for Lever Brother Soaps in the 1930's on the West Coast. Any connections.*

*I am searching for a Yhost Lever (b.1800) who came from Germany thru Pennsylvania to Indiana and then Michigan...*

Fortunes lost, or rather never found, Billy Lever continued his trips across Newfoundland. The average speed of the train was 25 miles per hour, and at some points the trains could go no faster than five. The train would chug past herds of caribou, through fields of bog, over countless wooden bridges. Turk's Gut Siding to Brigus Junction, through Cupids and Makinson, to Country Road and Bay Roberts. Selling tools to the Bay Roberts ship builders, feasting on seal flipper pie at a Mrs. French or Mrs. Badcock's house, the gamy red meat in a rich dark gravy, sealed over with pastry. Looking out to sea, little girls floating empty sea urchin bodies in the water for sailboats. Thinking of his own children, Nellie scarlet-fevered last year, her skin red and coarse with rash. Fever high and dangling tauntingly above his head, like a stolen hat.

Nanny's mother's maiden name was Jenny Godley. That seems to be a thing I have always known; as a child told that my mother was named Elizabeth for Nanny's stepmother, and that her middle name was Jenny, for Nanny's real mother. (And I fantasized that my own name, Jennifer, which I didn't like, was somehow derived from this history, though it really wasn't). It was never just Jenny, or Jenny Lever, always Jenny Godley. This name had a special power, it made me think of angels, beautiful



maidens with sad white faces, kind, in lovely old fashioned dresses. Forever young.

Perhaps spoken out of respect to the stepmother that would take her place, her maiden name now seems indivisible, one long breath. At only thirty-something when she died she spent more of her life as a Godley than a Lever, and her name spoke to a forgotten lineage, a mysterious and wonderful past that ended with her. Jenny's only brother also died young, without children, and the Godley name died out with her generation.

In 1924 Jenny Godley had caught pneumonia, a common killer before the days of antibiotics. The microscopic pneumococcus bacteria invade the lungs, inflaming the air sacs. The lung tissue fills with fluid, and the infection spreads throughout the bloodstream. Her lips and nailbeds bluish from lack of oxygen in the blood, coughing rusty sputum, breathing and pulse rate climbing. A feeling like a train parked on her chest. She wasn't sick long before she died, was not hospitalized. At barely two when her mother died my grandmother must have looked for her around corners, out windows.

After Jenny Godley died Jenny's mother came to live with the family and help take care of the children. Billy was travelling all week, and a maid was hired to help out with running the household and caring for the children while he was away.

Billy Lever, bowler-hatted, red-faced from cold, rode the train to its farthest reaches, through the Topsail mountains – even mountains sing of ships – up grades steeper than the rail tracks through the Rockies, slugging along the narrow-gauge track. At Gaff Topsails the tracks crossed a 1550 foot high plateau, known for its heavy snow drifts. In 1903 a train had been stuck here for 17 days, filled with passengers, because of twenty-three foot high snow drifts and blizzard conditions. The rescue train derailed, the



heroes frostbitten. Some twenty years later the giant red plows at the front of the trains still shovelled through heavy wet snow, the cars reversing and then ramming at the mound, rallying the passengers back and forth. Piling the banks up higher and higher on either side of the tracks till the trains were tunnelling through fifteen-foot high walls of snow on either side. Nothing but white through the windows, like riding off the edge of the earth.

Perhaps he rode as far as Port aux Basques on the island's south-west tip, twenty-five hours from St. John's. The trains packed with travellers heading for the ferries to North Sydney, the fortune seekers bound for Boston, to work at the fish company in Gloucester, or the General Electric Plant. As his brother Jim had done, along with thousands of other Newfoundland expatriates in the 1910's and 20's.

It wasn't long before Grandmother Godley passed away, and Nanny's paternal grandparents moved in to help out. They too had had their share of loss. Both Billy's brother Jim and Jim's wife died at a young age, somewhere in Massachusetts. Their two orphaned children were shipped back to Heart's Content to live with their grandparents. The girl died of pneumonia at just 20 years old. Raymond, the boy, took up fishing, trying to earn enough money to go to school in St. John's. He was only about 16 when he fell off the fishing stage while putting away his gear, and although he could swim he hit his head, and drowned. William and Rebecca Lever must have felt cursed, as though not just a storm cloud, but a full-force gale had settled itself above their family.

Summertime, once the long days of school had finished for the term, the other kids would go off to visit relatives in outports across the island. Fishing on the wharves,



picking berries with cousins. Nellie and Alice and Harold jealously stayed in St. John's, no cousins to visit.

Billy Lever munched on ham sandwiches in the smoking car, rumpled his trousers, took the branch line from Brigus junction perhaps to Heart's Content. Perhaps he stayed in the empty house where he was born, boarded over when his parents left to take care of his family. Dusty and drafty, echoing with the ghosts of Mummer's songs and heavy boots, the click of marbles in a bag, the murmur of bedside prayers.

Grandmother Lever took over as the woman of the house, overseeing the finances, making sure the house was spotless and the family fed, disciplining the children. Despite Nanny's charming smile life under Grandmother Lever's rule was rigid and strict for the girls. Girls, they tell me, were simply not as valued as boys. Their brother Harold, the eldest, was allowed to get away with anything. They didn't elaborate on what this means – if he played down by the waterfront, if he came home black-eyed and caked with mud. Nellie and Alice were watched with a keen eye. Grandmother Lever walked with a cane, and sometimes when the children went near her she'd knock them across the backside with the shaft.

But the maid was always on their side. Once when Nellie was little and wet herself, the maid swiftly pushed the rug under the bed so that her grandmother wouldn't see. She let the children watch with fascination as the cat pounced on a mouse, batted it about in its paws, lifeless.



In 1929 Nanny's Grandfather Lever passed away. There had been so much death in the family in just a few short years that the other kids in the neighbourhood refused to enter the house on Bannerman Street, declaring it haunted.

Twillingate, on an island in Notre Dame Bay, was once the centre of business and trade for the northern coast of Newfoundland. But when the railroad cut across the land, the sea-locked town was bypassed, making Lewisporte the new centre. Twillingate was left isolated. I don't know how Billy Lever met Elizabeth Churchill, if he left the train route and travelled by boat into the bay to the island of Twillingate. He must have ventured off the train route from time to time, in hired carriage or car. Elizabeth Churchill, at thirty-something, was a spinster, and the matron of the new Notre Dame Bay Memorial Hospital, a facility that brought the people along the northern coast access to healthcare. Miss Churchill was in charge of supervising the nurses, of laundry and cleanliness, tending the patients with tuberculosis or polio, twisting with fever, wrapped in pristine white linens.

In the early thirties Billy Lever and Elizabeth Churchill were married, and Elizabeth left her job in Twillingate to become matron of three orphaned children in St. John's. She was a prim and dignified lady, and she took over the household with confidence and organization. She didn't like the dark basement kitchen, so she had another one built off the back of the house. Scrubbed the four stories down from top to bottom. Grandmother Lever stayed in the house, and the children were responsible for bringing her hot water in the morning, waiting while the old lady sat up in bed to wash herself and comb out her long white hair.



*NANNY: When mother come things were done just like she - she was matron at the hospital down in Twillingate see? So she ran our house then like the hospital... We all had to sit down, and we all had to sit down together, and we all had to be watched, till the chores got done. But she was good though, I must say. She had some hard times from me sometimes. But I often think about it you know. Every Saturday, she said "you've got to grow up, you've got to have responsibilities you've got to know things." So we all had our chores to do every Saturday morning.*

Saturdays were the universal day for cleaning and chores, and Saturday nights the universal night for baths. A bar of Sunlight Soap in its bright blue and yellow box was used for scrubbing laundry, scrubbing the floor, and scrubbing bodies. Every house along the empty streets filled with the strong lemony smell. Children rubbed red and shiny, the sting of the harsh soap in my grandmother's eyes.

In those days women were always in charge of managing the household finances, budgeting out their husbands' salaries to buy meat or ice for the icebox. Though the family did well enough to keep a maid, Newfoundland women were taught to be practical, resourceful, and frugal, and in the difficult thirties Nanny's stepmother found ways to stretch her pennies like other housewives. Flour sacks were a cheap source of good cotton fabric, and Aunty Al and Nanny had flour sacks for pillow cases, carefully washed to soften them, embroidered with colourful flowers or other designs. Their new mother kept a scrap bag of the best bits of material for making quilts, and used old worn out blankets inside the quilts for filler.



Even at eight, ten and twelve there was no question that the children would call her mother.

Much of old St. John's is built in long row-houses, sharing walls, huddled together. On Bannerman street, in north downtown, the wooden ribbon of roof steps up the hill, each residence with a different coloured facade. St. John's and its close wooden homes have been flattened by fire more than once – in 1892 two thousand buildings were destroyed. Nanny's stepmother was always afraid of fire, of flames leaping from one home to the next along the narrow street. The children slept in the attic, and she lay awake nights thinking of the two wooden staircases the children would have to descend to get out. The old house did eventually burn down, years after the family left it.

Next door was a Catholic family, and Nanny remembers the thin wall that separated the kitchen from their neighbours' home.

*NANNY: And every night you'd get all the family and you hear them all saying the rosary. Oh my gosh. And that maid she was nosy and she would press her ear right into the wall you know and listen, you know you could hear everything! Every night. And mother used to say "come on, come out," and she'd make you get out of the kitchen. "Come out of the kitchen."*

I don't know what juicy secrets were revealed this way, or if the animosity between Catholics and Protestants ("Micks" and "Blacks") in Newfoundland was enough to make the rosary itself scandalous. Irish roots had left a great rift between many Newfoundlanders. Catholics and Protestants went to separate schools, were often not even allowed to play together. As girls Nellie and Alice went with other members of the



Cochrane Street church to visit seniors in the Salvation Army nursing home, and found that many of the Catholic residents refused to open their doors to United Church visitors.

Between church choir and schoolwork Nanny would clip along LeMarchant Road, skirts mid-calf swishing about her legs, curls bobbing. Kissing boys behind tree trunks. She was becoming beautiful. Trim-waisted, hair like hot cocoa. Nanny remembers telling her teacher she was sick, when she really just wanted to go see a matinee at the new Capitol Theatre. This was the age of epic dramas, lavish love stories, slapstick comedies. Spectacular musicals with big choral numbers, ladies in flowing dresses and dark lipstick dancing with such grace you could almost see them in colour. Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers dancing cheek to cheek in *Top Hat*, Clark Gable in the dramatic *Mutiny on the Bounty*. Nanny clutched her tummy pathetically. *You go home and get some rest then, Nellie*. When she arrived at the theatre the line was filled with other kids playing hooky. And she sank into the big fancy plush seats, bought licorice.

*NANNY: All I had to do was smile and I could get around anyone. Can't do that anymore.*

But as she giggles and shrugs her shoulders up coyly we all know that this is not true.

Nanny's father was rarely seen without a cigar in his mouth. And when his daughter hugged him I can imagine her face in the knit of his sweatered belly, the sweet, spicy smell of cigar smoke and wool. Many years ago my mother painted a portrait of her grandfather. It still hangs by the kitchen in her parents' house. He looks like a Billy – a more laid-back, easy-going name than William. His head is bald and round and his hearty



smile is jovial and kind. The painting is a heavy oil with a mottled ochre background, the colour of fingers stained with yellow tannins. Family members used to say that looking at it they could smell the cigar smoke.

Billy Lever would continue to travel, and sell, thriving on his work and the people long past average retirement age. He would ride shoulder to shoulder with American soldiers bound for the base at Argentia, on ancient trains put back into service for the war. The Americans who would nickname the railway the “Newfie Bullet,” a sarcastic reference to the train system’s speed. Would ride until the CNR took over the railroad after confederation, when the old steam cars would be exchanged for modern diesel, the harbour in Port aux Basques rebuilt with huge new ferry terminals, to strengthen the link between the mainland and the newest province. Until the CNR, citing a decline in patronage, finally replaced all passenger service with buses. People who had cherished the romance and adventure of the old railway were incensed, accusing the CNR of deliberately ignoring railway maintenance in order to discourage its use, and justify the termination of passenger service. The CNR said the buses were faster and more efficient.

My great-grandfather continued to travel, the comfortable sleeping berths and good food of the old trains replaced with the firm-stuffing seats of the new buses. His wares expanded to include items like CorningWare, the revolutionary line of dishes that could tolerate oven temperatures and looked pretty on your table. But with his granddaughter in his hand now instead of his daughters, he was still stopped in the streets of St. John’s by warm faces, still welcomed into outport homes where the dinner conversations lingered on the railway shutdown.



Grandpa is warming milk for Nanny in the microwave before bed. With the room empty she can hear herself speak, without being interrupted by Grandpa. And in her mind she is holding her father's hand, his big palm wrapped around her tiny hand like a blanket.

*NANNY: He'd be gone all week but he always made sure he got home on the weekends.*

*He'd take us to church in the morning and then we had to go to Sunday school in the afternoon, and when we come home from Sunday school you had to have your little nap then. He'd be ready for us, and he'd all take us by the hand, Al and I and Harold, the three of us, and go down to the cemetery. Ugh! But we went anyway because Dad was such a good sport he liked to talk and tell you things. I miss that too. Oh my, and when I think about it – I often think about the times we used to have. And the children they're never satisfied, they got everything now and they're still not satisfied, well we were satisfied with things.*

*GRANDPA: C'mon honey, your milk is ready.*

*NANNY: Wha?*

*GRANDPA: Your milk is ready.*

*NANNY: You milked a cow did ya?*

*GRANDPA: Yes, I did.*

Along the streets of St. John's it was important that your porch steps were clean. If the boards were muddy with footprints, if rain made a speckled pattern in the dust, it was considered a poor reflection on your family. Billy mounted them wearily home,



Nellie skipped down them in pretty black shoes with buckles, and Mrs. Lever and her bar of Sunlight scrubbed them till they shone.



~ ~ ~

*ME: [to Nanny and Grandpa] How did you meet?*

*GRANDPA: Oh out to church. We went to the same church see.*

*NANNY: Young people's school, you know.*

*GRANDPA: You had the Young People's Association, and you'd meet every Tuesday night –*

*NANNY: We went to Sunday school, and then we'd talk, at Sunday school,*

*GRANDPA: – and we'd play games, and that kind of stuff, and you'd go to Sunday school,*

*NANNY: Went to Sunday school and I taught the –*

*GRANDPA: Of course you had to go to church.*

*NANNY: ... And after that I went into the choir. And after that I married that old fella.*

*Some old now I tell ya!*

My grandparents were married on June 7<sup>th</sup>, 1944. Nanny's brother must have still been overseas with the Royal Newfoundland Regiment, other empty spots in the pews. Wartime weddings were small and simple, fabric too precious for elaborate white gowns.

I was married in Alberta, and made up for it with seashells adorning my bouquet, bridesmaids swathed in sea-foam green. At the reception danced barefoot to reels by unheard of Newfoundland bands like "Snotty Var" and "A Fine Crowd," lending our



c.d.'s to the d.j. My mother with toes pointed like a highland dancer, friends jigging with my little cousins, even Aunty Alice grooving to the music.

I was married the day after my grandparents' fifty-eighth wedding anniversary. At the rehearsal dinner we had a special Happy Anniversary cake, and months before I asked Aunty Alice to do some sleuthing and find out what "their song" was. At the wedding reception we asked the d.j. to dedicate "I Love You Truly" to them, and their inspirational fifty-eight years. I had secretly hoped that they would dance, but did not expect them to, both survivors of quadruple bypass surgery, neither in ideal health. But they did, shuffling about the dance floor to the plink of the piano. And I could almost picture her in a short war-time bridal dress, him with hair curly and wild and thick, bowtied, swirling around the dance floor.



## Divining

I changed my name  
 would not hyphenate love  
 took on the title of French duchy  
 Catholic farmers      drunken uncles  
 the mispronunciations  
 the Telus telemarketer who asked for Mrs. Diesel  
 Left behind the distant lineage  
 of ruthless St. John's merchants  
 a public park, a china shop  
 any relation to George, the poet laureate  
 the school bus driver who called me Jennifer Boring  
 Devised a new signature  
 and the McDonald's cashier called me "Ma'am"

New named after roadside kisses  
 homemade pizza and red wine  
 pillow-talking of George Bush or Wacko Jacko

*Simpsons* moments  
 and mothers  
 the poems he kept safe in a closet box  
 A name for descendants

History marrows in bone  
 in arteries, genetic afflictions  
 eye pigment      gait  
 word-love  
 swimming and mussel boils  
 New named  
 I hold my roots out  
 divining my way toward water





*The city was bursting with servicemen, military parades and airforce training flights, the constant rumble of war. People diverted their minds with Canadian Army hockey games or rowing in Bowring Park.*



### The Stepping - Off Place

On Signal Hill, in a corner of St. John's, when you look out to sea there is nothing between you and Britain. And sometimes here it does not seem so far, to the windy cliffs and rugged hills of Ireland. In 1939 they must have felt the breath of Europe on their necks. There are cement bunkers here, built into the cliff side, graffittied with the names of WWII soldiers.

St. John's is tucked in around the waterfront, and Signal Hill rises over the city at the harbour mouth like a mother watching over a cradle. The hill extends down below the surface of the sea, to form one side of the Narrows, the tight and shallow entrance to the harbour. A man my uncle knew found a seventeenth century canon ball on the bottom. Here John Cabot found the door to a New Founde Lande, the British and the French fought for the New World, and during the Second World War we defended the gateway to a continent.

My grandfather was just seventeen when the war broke out.

*During the war everything was blacked out. No lights, never saw a light anywhere. You couldn't walk along the street and light a cigarette. Because they might - an aircraft flying over might see it you know? And the cars, the cars had a hood over the headlights, which was probably a foot long, and the width of the headlights on the older cars you know? And they just kept the light right on the ground in front of the car. And all the cars were equipped with that, if you didn't have that you weren't allowed to drive it.*



*And we had shutters on the windows, so you couldn't see any light outside at all. See it was the stepping-off place to North America, as you can well imagine. And it was the stepping-off place to the United States. So they were very cautious.*

The war is sometimes called the war in Europe. In grade twelve social studies we learned of The Battle of Britain, Mussolini and Stalingrad, of Canadians in battle on distant fronts. I always imagined the batteries on Newfoundland cliffs to be silly and overcautious. I never knew that they had anything to shoot at.

*During the last war yes, twas some very great activity in Newfoundland. In fact, there was a German submarine sailed up Conception Bay. And there were two boats tied up there waiting to take iron ore, and they were torpedoed, sunk right there. And that's right in the bay you know? And the big high cliffs on Belle Island, they had guns up there in the home – what they call the home defense, which was soldiers who were stationed in Newfoundland. And I understand they tried to fire at this submarine, but they couldn't deflect the guns low enough, so the crew came right in under the cliffs. But they did fire a few shots and I understand they landed over in some village across the bay. It's only 2 miles across or less.*

*But all around the coast they were swarming with German submarines. I understand they fired a couple of torpedoes in through the Narrows to try to get the boats in the harbour in St. John's. But they couldn't get them in there because it was a very narrow passage to let boats to come in through. And they exploded on the rocks, just outside. But they tried desperately to get to the boats in the Narrows, in the harbour you know?*



My grandfather grew up on a farm on Torbay Road, just outside of St. John's. Saturday mornings the road was a bustle of traffic, the farmers in their carts bringing milk to the dairy, the people from the village of Torbay heading into the city with rabbits and bundles of kindling to sell. In the wintertime shovelling in the ruts in the road and packing it with snow. The spot is well within St. John's limits now, slowly swallowed over the years by the growing city. But in the 1930's it was the country, close enough to St. John's to commute for work and school, far enough to look out on the hilly fields curtained with tall woods, the large pond straddling their land and their neighbour's. Communities in all four corners of the city were farms a mere sixty years ago. And though today people don't think of "the rock" as a place for farming, for the better part of two centuries many St. John's families lived off the land, and not the sea.

My grandfather hates that expression, "the rock." He finds it demeaning. Too many warm afternoons plucking tiny turnips so that those remaining would have room to grow. Boots caked with soil, fingernails stained with black rings. At one time I thought it was just the older generations overreacting, that "the rock" was a fond and endearing term for my rugged and romantic island. But the more I write this the more I agree with him, that the word seems to suck the island dry. *Have mercy on us down in Newfoundland*, orated Joey Smallwood in Ottawa in 1947, *We are but a fog-shrouded rock in the North Atlantic*. And as Smallwood negotiated the terms of Newfoundland's union with Canada thus began the dubious relationship between Canadians and their newest province, a relationship in which "the rock" was always a barren and backwards place on the periphery. My grandfather is among those who believe that there was a confederate



conspiracy that skewed the referendum, will use any opportunity to tell you how on the day that Newfoundland joined Canada the buildings in St. John's were draped in black. He also thinks that Canadian weather reporters make Newfoundland sound colder or snowier than it really is. But while his opinions may be stubborn or extreme, when I hear a Newfie joke on the morning radio I can't help but think he has a point.

On most smaller St. John's farms the men had day jobs, and left the running of the farm to their wives and children while they were at work. My great-grandfather was no exception, working full time for a margarine factory in the city. While Grandpa finished high school, he helped his brother Leslie, six years older, tend the land. While Leslie drove their father to work in the early morning my grandfather milked the cows, and after school in the afternoon he milked them again. This was a job often done in the dark hours, the cold of a small stool, the smell of cow manure in a drafty barn stall, the tinkle of milk squirting into the cold metal bucket. His head jumbled with names of English kings, dates of ancient battles for history tests, mathematical equations or chemical reactions, other important high school facts.

I don't know if my great-grandfather ever found it ironic that while his son was home milking cows, he was heading off to a margarine factory. His employment at the factory ensured him a good steady wage and, in difficult financial times, an element of job security. The Newfoundland Butter Company, which bought out his original employer Harvey and Brehm, was known for its progressive labour practices, implementing a pension program and a full medical plan for employees, the first such programs in Newfoundland.



The Newfoundland Butter Company on LeMarchant Road bore the first neon sign in Newfoundland, a giant cow that glowed above the building's main entrance. Otherwise the company boasted a factory in keeping with its residential neighbourhood, with well-kept lawns and flower beds and leafy trees. Inside, the Newfoundland Butter Company didn't make butter at all. They made margarine - commonly called butter in Newfoundland. Real butter was called table butter, and, with a minuscule dairy industry, was consumed far less than margarine. Farmers did sell a lot of their milk to the Newfoundland Butter Company, after the company launched a dairy division and began pasteurizing milk and cream in 1928. But while their Canadian neighbours maintained a complete ban of margarine under pressure from the dairy industry, in Newfoundland there simply wasn't enough butter to go around.

At this time Newfoundland's margarine was made with seal oil. The process involves heating the soluble and insoluble ingredients separately in vats, then churning them together to form an emulsion. The emulsion is passed through heat exchangers to be cooled and hardened. I imagine it would be a smelly process, the gamy odour of hot seal fat, churning in a white oily vat. I wonder if there would have been a fishy taste to the end product. I don't know if my great-grandfather ate margarine himself; his wife probably made her own real butter with an egg beater from their own fresh cream, as most farm wives did. Perhaps his employment there wasn't ironic at all, but a perfectly logical marriage.

For his two sons work back at the farm was laborious, but held the rewards of freedom from the city, the clichéd tonics of fresh air and exercise. In the wintertime the two young men spent the bulk of their days chopping wood, from the fifteen acres of



woodland that towered behind the house. In fall they would cut the spruce and fir for the winter and haul it out of the woods. Then every morning they had to chop wood for the kitchen stove, which burned eight to ten hours a day, and the stove in the hall, which burned twenty-four hours a day. Because they weren't supposed to work on Sunday, on Saturday they had to chop wood for all day and night Saturday and Sunday, and Monday morning.

*The pond used to freeze over, course we'd make a skating rink. Shovel the snow off and we'd go down there skating, and used to be crowds of people come in from town, they'd come in for skating on the pond, on the ice. And we used to really enjoy it... A hundred feet from the house.*

Come summer my grandfather joined his brother full time tending the farm. Every morning before breakfast, after the cows were milked, they would go down to the pond for a swim. They might spend the morning yanking out the weeds that tangled around the turnip and potatoes, the shepherd's purse, the hempnettle, the thistle or hare's ear mustard. Daunting work, moving down the endless sloping rows of crops. Often before lunch they'd go and swim for another half hour, to cool off, wash away the sweat and dirt in their skin. After lunch they'd be back to work, until 4:30 when they'd have their third swim of the day, before Leslie went to pick up their father from the factory. I don't know what they talked about during these swims, if Leslie was advisor and confidant to his little brother, if the six year age difference was an unbridgeable gap, if they tried to outswim each other or dunk each other, or listened only to the pond's cool silence. My grandfather and his sister Millie drive each other crazy because they are too much alike, both stubborn and opinionated, engaging in hour long arguments over whether their bread



is called “buns” or “rolls.” *They’re not buns, you sit on your buns!* But he never mentions Leslie in any personal way.

*We’d go down there fishing – it had all sorts of trout into it, and a river running in and a river running out. Our swimming hole was right in the mouth of the river running in. And all the summer we’d be down there.*

*And in the nighttime, we’d be out to the veranda across the front of the house – big two storey house, big wide stairs going up, and the veranda right across the front. In the summertime we’d be out sitting on the veranda, and you’d see the moon shining on the water you know? It was beautiful. That pond was the life of the place.*

In August every farmer made hay to feed to their cattle and horses. The process was usually a family affair. Most used horse-drawn mowing machines to cut the hay, and usually it was the kids who followed behind the machine to clear the cut hay away from the uncut, so that the loose bits didn’t get caught in the mower. Once the hay was cut they left it on the field for a few days, turning it over a few times to dry, and gathering it into stacks to sit overnight. Once dry it was raked together and hauled into the barn for storage, the sweet ripe smell filling the loft, bits of hay poking the skin inside shirt sleeves, pant cuffs. I can picture my grandfather and his brother pitching hay up to the barn loft, one forkfull at a time.

In 1938, between hay-making and cow-milking, my grandfather was studying *Richard III* in a grade eleven English class from a brown pocket size volume. I know this because the book sits neatly on a shelf in my living room, with other antiques, his name and the date printed neatly on the inside cover. Perhaps as he read of a corrupt, power-



hungry leader he was reminded of rumours of war in Europe. The threat probably seemed a world away.

~

But by the beginning of 1939 the world was barrelling toward war, and Newfoundland was eager to fight alongside Mother England. Thousands joined the British Army and Navy or joined forces with Canadian troops. Twelve thousand signed up for the Newfoundland Militia. In 1940 the 59<sup>th</sup> Newfoundland Regiment of the Royal Artillery was created, because recruitment for the 57<sup>th</sup> Newfoundland Regiment exceeded what was needed. Hundreds of men were stationed on Britain's eastern coast, others were sent to North Africa.

Meanwhile defending the home front became a top priority. An anti-submarine net was erected at the St. John's harbour entrance, which could be lowered and raised for friendly vessels to come and go. All personal film taken in to be developed was reviewed by the Newfoundland Constabulary, and any shots that showed the harbour or other important information about the city were censored. Photos of children posing in front of the Narrows, with the anti-submarine net visible in the background, were confiscated by the authorities. Water street, in downtown St. John's, was equipped with a military installation, and sleepy outports were suddenly fortified with military personnel. In some spots along the coast fake batteries were created with barrels, to look like gun emplacements from a distance.



*A number of the Germans had boasted about going to the shows in St. John's.*

*Submarines would come in, and all around were little coves and those sorts of places and they'd come in, they'd surface there, into those little hidden coves you know? And some of the crew would go ashore. Go out to St. John's, wherever, go to the shows and all that.*

*So St. John's was right in the midst, right in the midst of the war. You'd see boats coming in there with holes, in the side of the boat you know and some with holes right through the bow, you'd see through, and you could drive a truck through the hole. And that happened right outside the harbour no doubt. But they managed to get in and they'd patch them up, and they'd go on again.*

Leslie left to fight in the war the same month that my grandfather turned eighteen, joining some three thousand Newfoundlanders that enlisted with the British Royal Navy. In WWI the Newfoundlanders had built a reputation for bravery and reliability, and in the Second War were therefore spread out in small pockets on hundreds of British ships, from aircraft carriers to submarines. Leslie was stationed as an ordinary seaman on a small trawler called the *Abronia*, used to sweep for mines. In the heat of the war the Nazis were determined to take control of the Atlantic and cut Britain off from supplies from overseas. Lasting the length of the war, the so-called "Battle of the Atlantic" is considered the longest battle in history. Hundreds of mines were laid in the sea during the war, suspended in the water to wait for approaching ships. Some were magnetic, others were pressure sensitive, others acoustic. Some were set with special mine-laying ships, and many were dropped from planes above. Most mines were suspended in the water, kept submerged at a certain level by a cord attached to an anchor. Minesweepers were employed to cut the mines with a cable attached to a paravene, which floated behind the



boat. Once the cut mine floated to the surface, it was detonated with rifle fire. The sailors would crowd along deck with their weapons, all taking aim at the cactus-like ball bobbing in the water. If its buoyancy chamber was pierced it would sink quietly to the bottom. But if another part was hit it would explode in an awesome fountain of dirty water spraying some eighty feet into the air. But minesweeping was a tedious and dangerous job. One false move could result in disaster. Minefields were cleared by fleets of minesweepers, moving alongside each other painstakingly through the grid of bombs. All hands put on their lifebelts as the trawlers entered the grid.

While mines were an extremely cheap and effective weapon, the major threat to allied vessels in the Battle of the Atlantic was German submarines. U-boats were capable of remaining away from port for more than three months, and could dive below the surface in thirty seconds. As the Navy ships moved through the water the crews never knew what might be waiting unseen beneath the surface.

On September 7<sup>th</sup>, 1940, only four months after he left home, my great-uncle's ship was docked at the Royal Albert Docks in East London. Leslie was on watch that afternoon, patrolling up on deck when the German planes approached. He would have seen the 300 bombers advancing, like a black cloud rolling in off the water. No one had ever seen that many planes in the air at once. Anti-aircraft fire was no match for the incredible force. That night, the first night of the Blitz, and what would become known as "Black Saturday," the Luftwaffe would drop 300 tons of bombs on east London. Leslie probably did not live to see London burning – the first of the bombs were dropped on the docks. He was twenty-four years old.



Leslie's body was found and buried in a cemetery in East London. So many people died in London in the following days that mass graves were dug – one for the bombed convent, another for the school-turned-shelter, another for the crew of the *Abronia*. My grandfather has never been to Europe, has not seen his brother's resting place. But he heard that later on in the war the Germans bombed that cemetery, and though the headstones have been repaired there are no bodies left there. My grandfather's eldest son, named Leslie after his uncle, went to England and brought my grandfather back pictures of a large concrete memorial, one of dozens, with all the names on it. Leslie's name can also be found on the Royal Navy's "honour roll," but all that seems to mean is that he died.

A few months after Leslie was killed my grandfather tried to join the airforce. But they wouldn't take him, declaring "one in the family is enough." Instead he took night classes in wireless telegraphy, and the following year he was stationed in Labrador, at Hopedale, and then Battle Harbour. Labrador, like Newfoundland, was bustling with military activity, with huge airforce bases, tiny Inuit communities swollen with military personnel.

My grandfather was doing predominantly meteorological work. Meteorological reporting was of crucial importance to both sides. Storm fronts usually moved west to east, and weather in Labrador was vital to making forecasts for ships at sea. U-boat crews tried several times to set up weather stations along the Labrador coast, succeeding once. No one knew the German station was even there for many years after the war. Labrador



Residue of Naval Assets.

In the case of Ernest Leslie Garroway deceased.

In reply quote—

No. D.N.A. (Wills) 5978/1940

Admiralty, D.N.A. (Wills),

and address letter to—

The Inspector of Seamen's Wills,  
Admiralty, D.N.A. (Wills),  
Bath,  
Somerset.

Bath, Somerset.

10 April, 1941

I have to inform you that your claim as Executor

of the above-named deceased has been admitted, and that payment will be made to you in due course.

I have to add that you are bound to administer this estate according to law, and that a Certificate, authorizing you to do so, will be forwarded with the order for payment. The directions on the other side of this form (No.       ) should be carefully noted.

The deceased's service certificate is enclosed

I am, Sir,

Your obedient Servant,



Inspector of Seamen's Wills.



became a crucial strategic area, a refueling station for planes en route to Europe or manning the front at sea.

*Just down from the station 200 feet was a metal building, and I understand it was right full of high octane gasoline. And in the event that a German submarine came in there, we had orders to stand off and machine gun this. And I'm afraid I'd be running yet! Cause that was suicide, to machine gun all that high octane gasoline.*

As my grandfather sailed up the coast toward his post in Labrador, one evening a woman on board told the captain that she saw a periscope in the water. The captain reassured her that there was no way it could be a periscope. But that night, he pulled the ship in to one of the bays right up close to the land, where they stayed for the night.

My grandfather woke up in the wee hours of the morning to a bright light sweeping across the ship. He must have held his breath till the light had long disappeared.

Next morning a convoy of allied ships nearby was sunk by submarines. Grandpa figures they didn't think his ship worth a torpedo. But the ill-fated ferry "Caribou," which was sunk in 1942 on its way across the strait to Sydney, was a vessel of the same class. 137 passengers and crew members died in the attack. He believes his ship would have been torpedoed too if the captain had not pulled her in for safety, out of the open water.

In these first years of the war the population of St. John's surged. The Canadian Army took over Buckmaster's Field for their headquarters, and began construction on Torbay airport. Hundreds of Newfoundlanders filed in from the outports to build the airport, slogging through peat bog and rocks to pave the new runways. By 1942 the air



was buzzing with RCAF planes on anti-submarine patrol. Canadian barracks were dotted around the city; one farm on Torbay Road had an anti-aircraft gun in their field.

In January of 1941 the former luxury liner the “Edmund B. Alexander,” full of hundreds of American army troops, waited outside the Narrows for better weather to enter the harbour. They waited for four days in the tossing seas, young men who didn’t know where Newfoundland was, puking with seasickness. When the water supply became contaminated the men were issued two cans of beer per day. On January 29<sup>th</sup> the ship finally squeezed into St. John’s harbour, the largest ship ever to enter the Narrows. Newfoundlanders crowded the harbour front to watch the grand ship come into port, greeting it warmly with American flags, red white and blue bunting on houses. The streets were flooded with American soldiers in uniform, with New York or West Virginian accents.

It was the American and Canadian armed forces that first popularized the term “Newfie.” An affectionate, if condescending word for their friendly hosts, a word that would take on a demeaning connotation in the coming decades, paired with Newfie jokes, “goofy Newfie,” and other negative stereotypes. *How do you get a Newfie out of a tree?* A word that today my grandfather ranks with the worst of racial slurs.

In March of 1941 the British government signed an agreement with the U.S. leasing the Americans land for military bases on the island, for ninety-nine years, in exchange for fifty obsolete destroyers. The Americans lived on the “Edmund B” for three months, hosting dances on board where hundreds of young Newfoundland girls met American husbands. In May the soldiers were transferred to a city of tents on Carpasian Road called Camp Alexander, while they waited for the completion of Fort Pepperrell,



their new base on the south side of Quidi Vidi lake. By 1943 over 5000 military personnel were stationed at the fort, and over 3000 Newfoundland civilians were employed there. American wages could not be paid to Newfoundland workers, because the government was worried that the higher wages would disrupt the economy. Newfoundlanders who worked on the base were paid 25 cents an hour, a fraction of what the Americans offered. This was nevertheless a good wage for the time, and gave the Newfoundland economy a tremendous boost. Still more Newfoundlanders flocked to the city, the population of which had almost doubled from 1938 to 1941.

For two years, with my grandfather away, my great-grandfather managed to keep the farm going. During the war years farming was getting easier in many ways. Farms were becoming increasingly mechanized, and new aids like tractors and milking machines increased productivity. The influx of American and Canadian soldiers increased the demand for farmers' products and business was booming.

Despite this progress the number of farms around St. John's was rapidly declining. Some farms were expropriated for Fort Pepperrell. Others were taken over by the Canadian army or the new airport. My great-uncle Leslie was only one of hundreds of young men who left family farms to fight, and with the increase in employment opportunities labourers willing to work for low farm wages were difficult to find. While the growth in population also increased the demand for their products, farmers simply didn't have enough hands to stay ahead of their crops, and with their land in demand by city developers, many farmers simply sold their land and moved into the city. Dozens of



farms were swallowed by new housing developments and shopping malls as St. John's population bowed out its borders.

After long hours at work in the margarine factory, my great-grandfather loved to come home to his farm and walk in the fields. But though his wife had always helped tending the farm, with their children gone they did not have enough help making hay for the cows, harvesting the vegetables. The two leaned over the fields digging up potatoes, sorting them by hand, fingers rough and callused, spines hunched. He was still more than a decade from retiring, and my great-grandmother began to complain that they could no longer manage it on their own.

With the opening of the new airport Torbay Road was paved. The road that had been packed with farmers in horse-drawn carts was now rumbling with RCAF vehicles and American army personnel. The city was bursting with servicemen, military parades and airforce training flights, the constant rumble of war. People diverted their minds with Canadian Army hockey games or rowing in Bowring Park. The annual St. John's regatta on Quidi Vidi lake continued through the war to keep up morale, crowds sitting on the grass to watch the boat races, now shadowed by the buildings of Fort Pepperrell. Young soldiers, barely twenty, and their St. John's girlfriends packed the Capitol Theatre to hear Bing Crosby croon "White Christmas" in *Holiday Inn*, drank cherry beer in Movie Chat, a hangout across the street. Went to dances at the USO on Merrymeeting Road, swinging to Glenn Miller and Benny Goodman, *don't sit under the apple tree, with anyone else but me.. 'till I come marchin' home...*



Many of the soldiers that swarmed to the city were housed in the Knights of Columbus hostel, a large, boxy wooden building on Harvey Road. One Saturday night in December of 1942 the auditorium was packed for a dance that was being broadcast live over the VOCM radio station. “Uncle Tim’s Barn Dance,” led by the lilting voice of Biddy O’Toole, was well into a set of Irish folk songs and Western tunes when the music stopped. People in living rooms across St. John’s heard someone shout “fire” on their radios, before the signal went dead. The shuttered blackout windows and locked doors prevented many from getting out, the panicked crowd pressing forward toward the remaining doors, which opened inward, preventing the people in front from opening them. Because of the blackout the fire lit up the whole city, and could be seen for miles. The building burned to the ground, killing 99 people, injuring more than a hundred more. It was found that arson was the cause, but the enquiry dismissed speculation that the fire was started by enemy agents. My grandfather, along with many others, was convinced it was spies.

*That was the worst one, but shortly after that twas another one down on Water Street West. It was called the Red Triangle Club. It was just gyproc ceilings, plaster board ceilings, you know, on wooden beams. So one afternoon a foot came down through the ceiling. Stepped off the beam I suppose. And they rushed up there, in the attic, but there was nobody there then, he was long gone. But they found toilet paper, strewed all over the attic everywhere, and he was all set to probably saturate it with gasoline or something. And then strike a match and get out you know?*



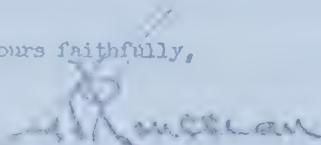
H.M.S. SEAFORTH,  
H.M.C. Dockyard,  
Halifax, N.S.

5th June, 1941.

Dear Sir:

Cheque is enclosed herewith for \$8.17, representing the balance of wages due to your late son, Warwick Leslie Noseworthy, Ordinary Seaman, LT/JX.208914, in accordance with the attached Certificate of the Inspector of Seamen's Wills, and it is requested that you will be kind enough to sign the enclosed forms of receipt, and return same to me as soon as possible. The Certificate from the Inspector of Seamen's Wills is to be retained by you.

Yours faithfully,

  
R. Russell

PAYMASTER LIEUTENANT, R.N.R. —  
ACCOUNTANT OFFICER.

Mr. Henry T. Noseworthy,  
Portugal Cove Road,  
SAINT JOHN'S,  
Newfoundland.



St. John's may not have been at the centre of the war, but it had its own share of casualties. My grandfather tells tales of devastating loss, and personal stories of more insidious wrongs. His tales emerge not in any linear way, but as splinters of experience, moments that he will never be able to forget. He held several jobs during the long years of the war, and I cannot keep them straight, don't know which came first or last, when he was in St. John's and when he was in Labrador.

*And I remember there was one boat, twas called the Dayrose. And I don't remember the Captain's name. But I was doing Customs work for a company called Job Brothers and Company, and we were the Dominion of Newfoundland then you see, we weren't part of Canada. So this boat was coming from Wales with a cargo of coal. And this Captain was a Welshman. He was an elderly man, seventies I suppose. And he had been retired for years but when the war broke out he went back to sea. I cleared the boat for customs, and I brought all the necessary papers aboard and so on and the Captain and I became quite good friends. In fact, he wanted me to go with him, and needless to say I wasn't going to do that. But he begged me to go with him. He was one person short on the crew. But I wouldn't do it anyway.*

*And I remember he gave me a dollar, which I promptly spent, because I didn't know the difference. And I think he sailed in the morning, and by afternoon – yeah same afternoon – three of the crew showed up back in port. The boat had been torpedoed just outside St. John's. It went down, the captain was lost and all, twas three survivors. That's all, everybody else, everything else was lost.*

Other casualties were quieter, less tangible. At another point in the war Grandpa was collecting rents on behalf of a city law firm. He befriended one of the ladies he



collected from, and when he came each month she always invited him in for coffee. Her son was away fighting overseas, and the woman was all alone. One month she was unable to pay her rent; the cheques she received from her son had not yet arrived. My grandfather told her not to worry about it, and they had their coffee and their visit and he went on his way. The next month her cheque still had not arrived, and again he told her to pay when she could. He thought her cheque must have been lost on the way, sunken with a torpedoed ship. The third month she invited him in as usual, and told him that she didn't have any sugar but she had a little coffee she would share. He declined the coffee, told her not to worry about the rent.

When he went back to the office that afternoon he was called into his boss' office, and asked why this woman hadn't paid her rent in three months. My grandfather explained that the cheque from her son had not come, that it must have been on a torpedoed ship. The boss told him "either get the rent, or get the bailiff." In those days getting the bailiff meant putting her out on the street; there were no laws to protect the tenant, she would not have any notice before she was kicked out of her home. My grandfather said "if you want to get the bailiff, you'll have to call him yourself. If this is law I don't want anything to do with it." And he stormed out. He never saw the old lady again, he imagines that she was deposited on the sidewalk with her belongings. My grandparents remember seeing people sitting by the road in those days, surrounded by a house worth of furniture, rooms moved outside. Nowhere to go.

Sometime in 1942, still more than a decade from retiring, my great grandfather reluctantly sold the farm. It may have been in the spring, seeding potatoes by hand,



cutting out the eyes with a knife. It may have been in the summer, digging out the pit of manure, caplin, fish offal, seal blubber, and shovels full of bog, for fertilizer. Dumping it on the land, then spreading it meticulously with a fork. It may have been in the fall, faced with haymaking, or the winter, sludging through snow to the well, cold water slopping over the sides of a frosty pail. The couple found a small house on Cavell Avenue. Running water, central heating, old farm furniture crammed into the new stuffy rooms.

*Mother would be out to church, just about every night, Women's Association meetings, all that kind of thing. And he'd be home sitting in the little living room all night long by himself. After leaving the farm which was his pride and joy. And I didn't realize, you know what that would do to him. Course I was only quite young, I was 20. I didn't realize what that was doing to him. But far as I'm concerned it shortened his life considerably. Because he just sat there in this room, and he used to love to go out and walk around the fields you know and look at the crops when he'd come home from work in the night.*

By the end of the war, once the American and Canadian soldiers began to trickle home, the Newfoundland Butter Company was forced to cut their milk production in half. Farmers went home with extra milk, hardened. Meanwhile margarine production thrived. In 1944 it was discovered that Newfoundlanders were seriously lacking in vitamins A and D, and henceforth margarine was fortified to combat the problem. Margarine was becoming a product of such importance that by 1947, when confederate leaders would begin negotiating the terms of union with the Canadian government, they would manage to convince Ottawa to violate a clause of the British North America Act and allow



Newfoundland to continue margarine production despite the ban in the rest of the country.

One Christmas, not long after the war, my grandfather's father came down with a flu that would not go away, stuck in bed with stomach cramps and vomiting. But the factory doctor told him he was fine, that he did not need to be hospitalized. And soon after he collapsed on the bathroom floor with a ruptured diverticulum. A diverticulum is a sac that bulges out of a weak spot in the colon. If it becomes inflamed or infected it is called diverticulitis, causing fever, chills, and nausea. If the sac ruptures and the infected fluid spills out into the abdominal cavity, it is called peritonitis, and can be fatal without surgery to clean out the fluid. At first the doctors refused to operate because of my great-grandfather's angina. Finally one night my grandfather got a call from a surgeon who told him he was willing to operate, that it was his father's only chance. The surgery was scheduled for the following morning at eight o'clock. He died at three.

*He'd come home from one job and he'd get something to eat and he'd go out on the grounds and he was working then till dark. And on Sundays then he'd go walking around, and twas his life. But he was looking forward to retiring on this, and he sold it, got rid of it. It was to satisfy Mother as far as I'm concerned. And I didn't know the difference. You know, didn't realize the difference, what it was doing to him.*

Grandpa may be more right than he knew. In the city fresh produce was not readily available, and after the war, unless you had a cow, milk was especially hard to come by. My mother would grow up in the fifties and sixties on canned evaporated milk, never heard of yogourt until her teens. The change in diet from fresh grown produce and real milk to canned vegetables and evaporated milk may have affected my great-



grandfather's ability to fight off his infection, and may even have caused it. The drop in vitamins and minerals would have compromised his immune system, a lack of fibre in his diet may have encouraged the growth of harmful bacteria. He might still have gotten diverticulitis and peritonitis, but he probably would have lived the five more hours until his surgery.

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The city had grown quickly with war, blaring with the hum of planes, the harbour teeming with warships and sailors. Woods were severed, rebuilt into houses and stores. Concrete clotting into streets, ponds choking with pavement. The spot on Torbay Road where the farm used to sit is now grown over with an apartment complex, a gas station and convenience store. I have probably been on that road before, but if I have I did not know it then.

*There was a man moved in, he bought the property next to us, and most of that pond was on his land. Now we weren't there anymore, we were living out in town then, but he got bulldozers in and he dozed out the river. And drained the pond. And it was a shame because it was the life living in there you know, without that, without that pond there... I think if we were living there we would have protested that, but Dad sold the farm and sold the house, and the people that bought it never moved in, he rented it. So twas nobody to protest.*

*And this fellow drained it because the people were going over his land, to get to the pond you see? They were going in there swimming and in the wintertime going in*



*there skating, and they had to go across his property. So that's what he did, he drained the pond.*

*And they tell me when he let it drain, he drained it out, and all the water was gone, they tell me the fish were flapping on the bottom.*





*“For King and Country  
W.L. Noseworthy, R.N.  
Killed in action, in trawler Abronia”*



### The Bosun Chair

The other day, rifling through a drawer in which my mother keeps old photographs, newspaper clippings, family artifacts, I came across a photograph of words, hand printed in block letters.

*For King and Country  
W.L. Noseworthy, R.N.  
Killed in action, in trawler Abronia  
while on patrol duty  
September 7<sup>th</sup>, 1940*

The original text was written on the back of a picture of Leslie in his Navy uniform, standing proud and smiling with a rifle propped against his shoulder. My mother took a picture of the back of the photograph, because she wanted a copy of the text. Even in the copy I can see the spots where the ink smeared under the author's hand, blurring the edges of the words. I am sure it must have been my great-grandmother who wrote on the picture. The text continues with a poem.

*One year has passed, our hearts still sore,  
As time goes by we miss him more.*

*To-day recalls the memory  
of a loved one gone to rest,  
And those who think of him today,  
are those who love him best.*

*The flowers we lay upon his grave,  
may wither and decay,  
But the love of him who lies beneath  
will never fade away.*



I suppose it could be just a common epitaph, a well known verse. My great-grandmother certainly could not have put flowers on his grave, five thousand kilometres across the sea. Or maybe I have been wrong to assume that she didn't write another poem after "The Loss of the *Duchess of Fife*." Maybe she wrote poems to mark all of the events in her life, clandestine journals tucked away by her bedside, scraps of paper hidden behind the stove. Her secret self.

My great-grandmother's name wasn't really Jean. It was Mavis. Mavis Jane Chaulk. Even my grandfather didn't know this until recently; he even has her birth certificate, which states her name as Jean. But in those days parishes kept all the records of marriages, deaths, and births, and my great-grandmother's church in Elliston had burned down. When they began to reconstruct the records after the fire, they simply asked her what her name was. And she said Jean.

My grandfather only recently found this out from a distant cousin of some sort who wrote a book on Elliston history, and how he found out I don't know.

It seems that the more research I do, the more questions I have. I know all about the history of margarine, the process of minesweeping, domestic service in turn of the century St. John's, the anatomy of a schooner. But I don't know what seal flipper tastes like, where Bannerman Street meets New Gower, if you can get a good sleep on a rumbling berth on the old steam trains. My father doesn't remember his grandfather. My mother doesn't know if Billy and Elizabeth had a long courtship, never thought to ask her grandmother why her family moved from Elliston to Brooklyn. My grandfather doesn't



really know why his father gave up masonry, and no one ever wrote to Lever Brothers to ask for another letter.

The place of my ancestry is not just another province, but another time, a place that exists in shaky memories deciphered from scratchy tapes and long distance phone calls, in a few verses that tell stories in cold rhyme, with little of their authors' presence. Salman Rushdie writes of his "India of the mind," a homeland that, for expatriates like him, exists only in the imagination. His idea of home has been altered by distance, time, and a fallible memory. I have never even lived in my homeland. Mine has been constructed from the reminiscences of aging relatives, filtered through my own scant memories and fantasies. I don't really know what a bosun chair looks like. I couldn't find any detailed descriptions in books on schooners or Newfoundland history, no pictures on the Internet. I did find out that the hoists for window-washers on sky-scrapers are also called bosun chairs.

Yet I imagine the bosun chair still. Drawing from fragments of poem, pictures of schooners, old adventure novels and movies about sailors. Slipping along the deck in pointed boots, wiping raindrops from the eyes, heaving large men, wincing with pain, over the ship's side. Shouting against the wind and groan of bow on the rocks. The rough splinters of wood, the itchy length of rope. And when I imagine it I am not standing on the ship watching, or floating above, looking down. I am leaning my body gingerly into the sling, gripping the ropes, white-knuckled, dropping in jerks, slowly descending into the boat that will bring me home.



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